CONTEMPORARY BELGIAN LITERATURE

JETHRO BITHELL

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BY

JETHRO BITHELL

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PREFACE

The present sketch of contemporary Belgian literature lays no claim to completeness. Belgium today teems with writers of merit; and to have dealt adequately with all of them would have needed a series of volumes padded with academic detail. The publisher and the author have for the moment no farther ambition than to stimulate interest, and to give information which is so sadly lacking in this country that some of the most distinguished of Belgian poets are living in exile in London unnoticed and without a welcome, making munitions (all honour to them), or living as they can.

There have been great difficulties of selection; and there are many authors whom I have read with profit who are not even mentioned. In some instances it has not been easy to decide whether an author is Belgian or otherwise. Huysmans was of Flemish parentage, but since he was born in Paris it is no doubt best to consider him a Frenchman.

The brothers J. H. Rosny, who rank with the very best of contemporary French novelists, might with some justice have been claimed as Belgian writers, for they are Belgians born, and they lived in Brussels, I am told, till well on in their teens. But they have been so long resident in France that they might possibly resent being docketed as Belgians. There is the same difficulty with regard to Francis de Croisset and Henry Kistemaeckers, the only Belgian-born playwrights who have become naturalised on the Paris stage. Henry Van de Velde, again, lives in Germany and writes in German; Paul Gérardy, most Belgian of Belgians, is a denaturalised Prussian; while Léon Souguenet is French-born but Belgian by habit.

There is always the question whether "Belgian literature" exists at all. . . . I have indicated in the course of the book that some eminent Belgian writers will not hear of such a thing. And, after all, one never hears of Swiss literature. . . . That may be, however, because there are so few Swiss writers of international reputation. Belgium, on the other hand, is not only rich in distinguished writers, but these writers have a marked Belgian

individuality, and for these reasons we are surely justified in claiming a national literature (one of the most interesting in Europe to-day) for the little country over which the Germans have ridden rough-shod.

To the living writers of Belgium this book would express a practical sympathy by calling attention to their work. They will need readers after the war; and they deserve them.

J. BITHELL.

CONTEMPORARY BELGIAN LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

BELGIAN LITERATURE TILL 1880

The best help in the appreciation of Belgian literature is an understanding of the course of Belgian history. Belgian literature, quite as much as Belgian history, is a record of warfare, an epic of invasions ventured and invasions repulsed, and of the clash of hostile races within the country itself. From without, two avid nations stretch out their armies to seize the soil of the land; from within, two cultures that refuse to intermingle advance and recede in their struggle for the heart and soul of the state. And it is in our own days that this age-long contest has reached the exasperation of its violence: never was the fight between Teuton and Frank so desperate as it is to-day, and never

has the racial animosity flamed more in the eloquence of orators and the passion of poets than it has done during the last thirty years between the Yser and the Rhine.

This struggle for supremacy between two races is at the same time a struggle between two languages, between French and German. These languages were first officially opposed to each other when, in the year 842, the two sons of Louis the Pious met near Strassburg and took an oath to support each other. Each monarch swore in the language spoken by the people of the other: Charles the Bald of France in German, and Louis the German in French. Here for the first time language faces language in a momentous episode of history. In the following year, 843, the solidarity of tribes speaking the same language was set at nought when, by the Treaty of Verdun, the empire of Charlemagne was divided among the three sons of Louis the Pious, for by this treaty the Scheldt was fixed as the western boundary of the buffer state created for Lothar, who thus found himself master of a portion of what is now Flanders, while the remainder of the Flemish country was

attached to Neustria, that is, France. On the other hand, the French-speaking tribes to the East of the Scheldt were incorporated in Lothar's kingdom, which, as far as the North is concerned, was mainly German in language.

It must be remembered that the Teutonic language spoken in the ninth century on either bank of the Scheldt was essentially the same language as that spoken along the Rhine: in primitive stock it was the German language, which split into Low German and High German, or, as we say now, Dutch-Flemish and German, but still kept all the resemblances of close kinship. Even at the present day, from the philological point of view, there is not much more than a difference in consonants between Dutch or Flemish and the High German spoken at Berlin; and there is still less difference between the language spoken by the common people in North Germany, *plattdeutsch*, and Dutch or Flemish.

The rivalry between Teutonic and French culture sharpened into savage animosity under the Counts of Flanders: while in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the aristocracy was French in

spirit, the burghers remained staunchly Flemish; and the parties which then received the names of Leliaerts (adherents of the French lilies) and Clauwaerts (those who held by the Flemish *clawing* lion) were the forerunners of the *fransquillons* and the *flamingants* of to-day. No comprehension of Belgian literature is possible unless we keep these racial and party differences in mind. We must class Belgian writers: firstly, as Flemings or Walloons; secondly, as adherents of French culture or of Germanic (Dutch-Flemish) culture. These are the simple lines of cleavage; but they do not, as we shall see, preclude complications. The racial distinction in particular is often illusory: thus, the Flemish writer Max Elskamp had a Walloon mother, while the Walloon poet Iwan Gilkin had a Flemish mother.

That part of Belgian literature which is French in expression, "la littérature belge d'expression française,"[1] is mostly the work of the Walloons, a race of Celtic extraction—the descendants of the old Galliæ or Belgæ—who were Romanised at an early

[1] This term, first used by Francis Nautet in his history of Belgian literature, has been generally adopted.

date. It would serve no purpose in this sketch to attempt to define exactly the boundaries of the Walloon country; but we may say roughly that the provinces of Hainaut, Namur, and Liége are Walloon—with the town of Liége as the literary capital—while of the other provinces of Belgium Antwerp, West Flanders, East Flanders, and Limburg are almost wholly Flemish. Brabant is mainly Flemish. Luxemburg is Walloon and German.

That part of Belgian literature which is Dutch in expression is the work of the Flemings. All educated Flemings know French, and some of them (Verhaeren, for instance) have never taken the trouble to master Flemish. How far the native Flemish of a writer colours his French style is often a fascinating problem; especially as the young Flemish authors of the modern school aim at reproducing their racial individuality in their French style.

The Walloon writers are, practically without exception, purists. They write the French of Paris. The Flemings, on the other hand, are not always purists: they do not all write the standardized form

of their language, which is Dutch. The poems of Guido Gezelle, for instance, are deliberately Flemish in vocabulary and turn of phrase. Just as Björnstjerne Björnsen in Norway, and the writers of his school, the rebels of the *maalstræv*, eschewed the pure Danish of Copenhagen to write what they considered to be the Norwegian tongue, so Guido Gezelle, and with him a tribe of "regional" writers, have preferred to write the language they heard spoken about them rather than lose sap and vigour by adapting their local idiom to written Dutch. Their intentions were justifiable, and the results have approved them; for Flemish literature, far from striking literary Dutchmen as an uncouth patois, turns out to have much the same charm as kaleyard has for readers in the south of England. To foreign readers, however, there is one great drawback: the Dutchman can guess the meaning of a vocable, but the foreigner who is learning the language has to rely on a Dutch dictionary, and here he will look in vain for many words which are purely Flemish.

There is the greatest difference between the spirit of the literature written by the two races.

Belgian Literature till 1880

Generalisations are always subject to exceptions, but one may venture to adapt an idea of Balzac and say that while the literature written by Walloons is a literature of ideas, the literature written by Flemings, whether in French or Flemish, is a literature of images. The Walloons think; the Flemings paint. The Walloons are logicians, masters of the correct outline; the Flemings are dreamers and colourists. The Walloons have produced no realists of distinction, for they are too speculative and selective for that form of art; the Flemings, with their ideal of matter magnified, have flung themselves into realism and out-Zolaed Zola, but their realism is almost always a dream-realism, in which dirt itself ferments with poetry. The play of fancy, the scintillation of ideas of the Walloons is opposed by the monumental vision, the glowing ecstasy of the Flemings. On the one side, philosophy; on the other, mysticism. In the Walloons there is the cult of exquisite form; in the Flemings there is a formlessness which often (as in Georges Eekhoud's novels) swamps a grandiose conception. In the Walloons there is the inevitable; in the Flemings, the sublime.

A few words are necessary as to the use in Belgium of the two languages. When, after the taking of Antwerp by the Duke of Parma in 1585, Belgium entered on a period of intellectual listlessness, the Flemish language, which had been illustrated by poets, artists, and scholars, fell into disuse; and when Napoleon incorporated Belgium in the French Empire he eliminated it altogether and made French the only official language. It was not till after the Battle of Waterloo, which Professor Paul Fredericq of Ghent calls "the dawn of the revival in the Flemish districts," that the Flemings began to take an interest in their mother tongue. The union with Holland helped them little, for by their arrogant bearing and direct injustice the Dutch alienated both Flemings and Walloons. There was, moreover, bound to be a complete misunderstanding between the Protestants of Holland and the Roman Catholics of Belgium. Literary influence there could be none, for to the Belgian catholics Dutch literature, by the mere fact that it was Protestant literature, was anathema, and the clergy did all they could to prevent the reading of Dutch books. After the revolution of 1830, which resulted

in the separation of Belgium from Holland, the Belgian Government made French the official language again; but as time went on the Flemings awoke to a consciousness of their rights, and the "Flemish Movement" began. In this fierce struggle against the supremacy and over-estimation of the French language, as of French ideals, the first hero was J. F. Willems (1793–1846). It was to Holland, and not to France, that the *flamingants*, or at all events the free-thinking enthusiasts among them, looked for intellectual support; it was Teutonic, that is, Dutch and German culture, not French culture, that was held out as the natural ideal of the Flemings. An old saw of the Middle Ages, that what is French is false,[1] was revived; while a comparison was made between the licentiousness of French literature and the domestic purity and healthfulness of Teutonic books. The French were corrupt; the Teutons were sound. These complacent main ideas of the Flemish movement were set in currency by J. F. Willems in his newspaper articles. He has left no work worthy of mention; the groundwork even of his philology has

[1] "Wat walsch is, valsch is."

given way: he must be remembered, however, as the herald of the Flemish renaissance.

But the man who, in the words sculptured on his monument at Antwerp, taught the Flemings to read, was Hendrik Conscience (1812–1883). There had been no popular literature before his novels appeared; and it would not be wrong to call him the father of Modern Flemish literature. It is curious that so Flemish a writer should be half French by birth. At the time when Napoleon I was pointing a pistol at the heart of England by turning Antwerp into a dockyard, Pierre Conscience, a French boatswain who had suffered a long captivity on British hulks, settled in the Flemish port as a foreman in the shipbuilding yards. He married a native of the town, a Flemish woman; and Hendrik Conscience was their son. The boy had no education worth speaking of, but he read all the books he could lay his hands on, including many an old tome hauled out of the rubbish heaps of his father, who, after the fall of Napoleon, had established himself in business as a paper dealer. Hendrik's health was delicate, and he was left very much to himself: he swam like a water-rat in the

Scheldt, and ran about the streets of Antwerp, picking up the legends of old Flemish life which had never died out among the people. This out-door life, full of the stuff of stories, ended when, in his teens, it became necessary for him to earn his keep as an usher in a school, a thankless position, in which his abnormal shyness, which troubled him throughout life and amounted to a disease, cost him great suffering. When the revolution of 1830 broke out, he enlisted with the rebel forces, and, in spite of his delicate constitution and dreamy nature, he would seem to have acquitted himself fairly well in actual fighting. He has related his experiences vividly in his *De Omwenteling van* 1830 (The Revolution of 1830.) His best known work is *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (The Lion of Flanders), a historical novel written round the Battle of the Spurs of Gold. Conscience has been celebrated by the *flamingants* as one of the heroes of their movement; he was anything but one-sided, however, and his novel *The Mayor of Liége*, with its glorification of the Walloons, is an adequate counterpoise to his *Lion of Flanders.* Conscience was no partisan: he was a Belgian patriot. From the

point of view of international literature, his novels have little value: they have the maudlin sentimentality and the stereotyped romantic characters of immature literature; they are, in the least complimentary sense, books for the people.

The Flemish Movement drew vigour from a number of poets who are still read. The influence of English poetry is glaringly manifest in the work of Karel L. Ledeganck (1805-1847). He is known in his own country as "the Flemish Byron," but there is nothing of Byron in this amiable, hard-working Philistine except a few tricks of style. However, Ledeganck is the classical Flemish poet to people who do not read poetry; his collected verse in a gorgeous binding may be seen, with *The Lion of Flanders*, on the centre table of the Flemish *salon*. The best known poem in the Flemish tongue was written by Ledeganck: it is *De Drie Zustersteden* (The Three Sister Cities), a tribute of sounding rhetoric to the poet's native city of Ghent and her rivals Antwerp and Bruges—Flemish cities these, so runs the moral, no sinks of iniquity as in the South. (All depends on the point of view: according to another Fleming, Georges

Eekhoud, Antwerp at all events has never in the course of its history lagged behind Sodom and Gomorrha.)

Ledeganck is the classical poet, but on the shelf or the costly table-cover. In the mouths of men it is Guido Gezelle (1830–1899) who is most frequently quoted. Ledeganck is praised, but Guido Gezelle is loved. "Guido Gezelle is the soul of Flanders," says a Flemish poet of our days, Hugo Verriest. Gezelle was born, a gardener's son, at Bruges; he was trained as a priest at Roulers, and learned English from the English students there. He was appointed *professeur de commerce*, teacher of commercial subjects (of which he knew absolutely nothing) at Bruges. Later on he received a more congenial post, that of teacher of literature, but his popularity with the students and his independent ways of teaching were offensive to his superiors, and it was found convenient to remove him to other duties. After filling various minor posts, he was given a curacy at Courtrai, where he spent twenty-eight years in what to him was exile. He had been in his element as a teacher of literature, and his heart is said to have been broken by his unmerited

disgrace. Not till he was in his sixty-ninth year was he recalled to Bruges to fill a position more in keeping with his distinction, and here he died in 1899. Before his disgrace he had published various volumes of verse, which had been favourably noticed but had not become widely known. Two years after his death a volume of his verse was published at Amsterdam, and the Dutch immediately hailed this obscure Flemish priest as a poet of the first magnitude. Since then his popularity has grown continually, and his best poems are now part and parcel of Flemish (and Dutch) culture. Unfortunately, political considerations have something to do with his vogue: persecuted by the orthodox party in his lifetime, he has been set up since his death as the idol of the Roman Catholic *flamingants*, and the result is that something more than justice is done to him. He was often inspired, but sometimes he was merely a headlong rhymester. At his best he was a most delicate poet—he had something of the grace and lightness of that other parson in a far village, Herrick, as witness this playful hymning:

A MAY DAY

The cherry-tree, as you may see,
  Has donned a robe of pride:
For it is May, and she to-day
  Must be a happy bride.

Her every bough is hiding now,
  All in the sunshine bright,
Behind a veil so pure and frail
  Of blossoms shining white.

When glittering rime in winter time
  Bedecked her, she was fair:
But fairer far her blossoms are
  Than frosted branches bare.

Her beauty then might show to men
  How their existence soon
Must pass in pain, as cold and vain
  As shadows under the moon.

But no disguise to cheat the eyes
  Is this her bridal dress:
O she is dressed indeed in blest
  And living loveliness.

Gezelle's pupil Hugo Verriest has published verse of distinction, and he is to-day one of the most distinguished men in Belgium: famous as orator, and

as head of the Roman Catholic Flemish movement.[1] Like his master, he has been relegated by his superiors to obscurity: he is the curate of Ingoyghem, "the remotest village in the Flemish provinces," a village which is doubly famous, because of its curate, and because it is the home of Guido Gezelle's nephew, the novelist Stijn Streuvels. Hugo Verriest, unlike Gezelle, has not been broken by the disgrace into which a Church that hates originality has sought to plunge him; indeed he has turned it into strength, and there is no Cardinal in the land who looms larger in the eyes of intelligent Roman Catholics than the fighting curate of Ingoyghem.

Of the French-writing poets before 1880, the most important is André van Hasselt (1806–1874). Born at Maestricht, he was by birth a Dutchman, and he learned French by dint of hard work. During a visit to Paris he made the acquaintance of Victor Hugo and Sainte-Beuve, and was by

[1] The Flemish Movement is split into two hostile camps. The Roman Catholic section hate Holland as the land of heretics; the liberal and free-thinking section, the heads of which are Pol de Mont and Cyriel Buysse, hate the Roman Catholic Church and are Dutch (if not German) in sympathy.

them converted to the Romantic programme. His masterpiece is the philosophical epic *Les Quatre Incarnations du Christ*. Van Hasselt explains his intentions as follows: "This work is but the development of several verses of Isaiah (chapters xv., v., 6–9), a simple *exposé* of the successive phases of the progress of humanity as determined by the manifestation of the Christian spirit in the main events of history, until the complete realisation on earth of the Saviour's teaching." This conception would repel most modern readers, though there are some whom it would attract; but in any case it is the idea rather than the execution which forces attention. André van Hasselt has at all events some importance in the history of French versification by virtue of his metrical experiments. He made determined attempts to write French accentual poetry, that is to say, verse constructed, as in English and Teutonic poetry, by the regular iteration of accents, instead of, as in French, by the counting of syllables.

Maeterlinck is not the first "popular philosopher" produced by Belgium. Much of the charm of Maeterlinck's first essays was contained

in the gentle pessimism of Octave Pirmez, "the hermit of Agoz," as he is called, from the castle in the Ardennes where he spent his days in meditation and in the contemplation of nature. At Agoz he wrote his *Heures de Philosophies*. His *Jours de Solitude* were inspired by his rambles in Italy. Pirmez was a Walloon mystic. His way of transcribing his thoughts and sensations reminds one of Amiel.

There is one Belgian writer before 1880 of whom it cannot be denied that he is of equal rank with the best men of to-day. This is Charles de Coster. He was born at Munich in 1827, in the house of the Apostolic Nuncio Count Mercy d'Argenteau, Archbishop of Tyr, who stood godfather to him. According to some investigators, the Archbishop was himself the boy's father, the mother being a servant in the Apostolic household. At all events no expense was spared in De Coster's education, and in the natural course he would have studied at Louvain, and advanced to high distinction, if his character had not been wayward. He was for a time a bank clerk, but ran away and struggled along at the democratic University of

Brussels, where he came under the influence of Eugène van Bemmel, a professor of literature who is remembered for a meritorious novel, *Dom Placide.* In 1854 van Bemmel launched the *Revue Trimestrielle* (1854–68), to which De Coster contributed his first prose. In another Brussels review, *Uylenspiegel*, which had Félicien Rops for an illustrator, appeared one of the short stories of De Coster's *Légendes Flamandes*, a book which was hailed with enthusiasm by discerning critics. These legends, the subjects of which were taken from Flemish folklore, were written in an old French style, the only idiom which in De Coster's opinion was fitted to reproduce the atmosphere of old Flemish life. The entanglement of a love affair cost the handsome and elegant young author the suffering which can be read in his *Lettres à Elisa*, published after his death by Charles Potvin. The old French of *Les Légendes Flamandes* was so like the real thing that it won De Coster the reputation of a mediævalist; and in 1860 he was appointed to the Royal Commission which had been created to publish old laws. This gave him a chance of studying old manuscripts, which he did with such profit

that old French became to him as natural a vehicle of thought as the French of his own day. Old Flemish, too, he knew thoroughly; he was versed in old Flemish authors such as Marnix van St. Aldegonde. If he had had staying power, his position would have assured him a competence; but he was too restless, and in 1864 he resigned, to find that literature was a slave-driver, and to feel more than ever what he called "the horrible power of money." In 1861 he had published *Contes Brabançons* (in modern French); this book helped to establish his reputation, but did not materially help his financial position.

With the old French classics—*Roman de Renard*, Montaigne, Rabelais—he had long been familiar, and he was able to imitate their style with far greater sureness than Balzac had done in his *Contes Drôlatiques*. He had fortified his linguistic knowledge by solid studies in mediæval history, and during his employment at the Archives du Royaume he had excerpted many old French and Flemish documents relating to the sixteenth century. He had studied the old chroniclers; van Meteren's Flemish chronicle in particular he had

read ten times. He needed all his learning for the masterpiece of his life, *La Légende et les Aventures héroïques, joyeuses et glorieuses d'Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak au pays de Flandres et ailleurs*, which took him ten years to complete. During the period of composition he roamed about in the Netherlands, familiarising himself with the localities of his story, visiting the *kermesses*, listening to the racy conversation of the peasants in the taverns.

The Legend of Ulenspiegel is a complex book. Its main purpose is superb: to write the epic of the Flemish race, to take a Flemish hero and in him to celebrate the deeds of the Flemings. But not in verse, for that would take away the sting of reality. It should be full of the immense sadness of Flemish history, and yet not be sad: Flanders should not show its wounds and ask for pity, it should jest at them. It should not so much curse the Spanish tyrant as mock him; it should show him impotent to quell the joy in life of a virile people. It should be a book of glaring contrasts: Fleming and Spaniard, tolerance and bigotry, should be opposed as black is to white. All the life of Flanders should

be concentrated on this its most heroic period, on the sixteenth century. Flanders should lose all, and yet be unconquered (was there some prophetic vision here?); the hero should not die—for the spirit of Flanders cannot die—but rise again from the grave. De Coster was fain to sacrifice position and comfort to live for this task alone: to create an atmosphere of poetry and legend in which his countrymen should see themselves idealised and yet true; and (since Flemish has no international significance) he would write in the old French of Rabelais.

There is room for different conceptions of the Fleming. It is possibly a misconception to think of him as a taciturn mystic, with all his fires burning inward, but ready to burst forth on provocation. This may be true of the Dutchman; it may be true of the peasants of the Campine as we see them in the novels of Eekhoud and Virrès. But it is not universally true; or at all events taciturnity is only one side of the Flemish character. Such a conception could not serve De Coster for the purpose of his epic, for it was to be Rabelaisian, not Calvinistic. The quality which struck him most

in the Fleming was that habit of cunning which we observed in the Boers, and which became familiar to us by its Dutch term, "slim." To call it "foxy" would be incorrect; for that would imply meanness; and the Fleming is hardly mean. He has an eye to the main chance at all times; but the typical Fleming, though never frank and transparent, only develops cunning to a fine art when he is threatened by superior force. This side of his nature is turned forth at epic length in the old poem of *Renard the Fox*, which was fashioned mainly in Flanders. De Coster was bound to be influenced by this poem in planning his book. But (though a Fleming so modern as Stijn Streuvels has re-written *Renard the Fox* and kept the old shape) modern thought is too direct to be placed in the mouths of animals. De Coster knew better than do that. He knew another old Germanic legend which satirises the follies and vices of the rich and shows the weak using cunning to baffle those set above him. This was the German chapbook of *Till Eulenspiegel*, which, in its Flemish dress of *Thyl Ulenspiegel*, had become so well known that the arch wag and

arrant rogue who gives the book its name had come to be claimed as a native of Damme, near Bruges. The genesis of *Eulenspiegel* was due to the same conditions as those which gave rise to *Renard the Fox:* the political helplessness of the serf in the Middle Ages except in so far as he could outwit his legal masters, the grasping lord of the manor and the corrupt priest. But whereas in the beast-epic there is bitterness, in the wag's itinerary there is a laughing superiority which mocks while it cheats. Renard is a venomous rogue; Eulenspiegel is an irresistible jester. It occurred to De Coster to fuse these two old tales, to blend the proverbial characters of Renard and Eulenspiegel, to give a valid reason for the trickery and make it work for a noble purpose, at the same time mellowing it by a luxuriant humour.

The legend of *Till Eulenspiegel*, which first appeared at the end of the fifteenth century, is sufficiently well known in its English form as *Till Owlglass.* De Coster takes over a number of the episodes bodily; others he modifies to suit his purpose. The great part of the book, however, is the heir of his own invention.

If Thyl had been merely a wag or a schemer, he would not have been the complete Fleming, for there is another salient trait in the Flemish character: that noisy mirth and joy in good things, that almost frenzied sensualism which runs riot in Eekhoud's and Demolder's novels, the Rabelaisianism of the old genre pictures, the rubicund gluttony of Jan Steen. But this quality is burlesque, not heroic; and Thyl was to be a hero. De Coster, therefore, detached this Flemish feature from Thyl and concentrated it in the person of Lamme Goedzak, a great eater, a sensualist who cannot live without his wife. This character was also proverbial, and De Coster took it from a series of old broadsides coarsely illustrating the story of a henpecked man. Thyl was to represent the brain and soul of Flanders, Lamme its stomach.

The story opens with idylls of childhood. Thyl grows up as the weeds grow, and plays his pranks and lives his idle life until his father, the very incarnation of unsuspecting innocence, is burnt at the stake and his mother put to the rack by the fiends of the Inquisition. He collects his father's ashes, and ever after wears them on his breast—

"My father's ashes are beating on my heart" is now the watchword—to fortify him in his mission of vengeance, in his crusade to redeem the land. He joins the *Gueux*, and roams the Netherlands, with Lamme Goedzak (since the brain cannot exist without the stomach) accompanying him, fomenting rebellion, recruiting soldiers, acting as a spy and messenger.

As in all tales of adventure, against the shape of light the shape of darkness is projected, hero faces villain. The villain is Philip II of Spain. De Coster had already pilloried the tyrant in *Smetse Smee*, a masterpiece of satire and merriment, one of his *Légendes Flamandes*. Thyl and Philip are contrasted in their doings from the cradle onwards. While Thyl is growing up by the canals and the hedgerows, amid the cackle of the busy guilds, with Nele, his foster-sister and his love to be (the symbol of the devotion of Flemish women), growing up along with him, a curtain is lifted at the Escorial and we see:

> "Now the Emperor, home from the wars, questioned wherefore his son Philip had not come to greet him.
>
> "The Archbishop who was tutor to the child answered

that he had refused to do so, for he loved only books and seclusion.

"The Emperor inquired where he was at that moment.

"The tutor answered that they might seek him wherever it was dark. Which they did.

"And when they had passed through a goodly number of rooms, they came at last to a kind of closet, with an earth floor, and lit by a sky-light. Here they beheld a stake driven into the ground, and thereto a she-monkey was bound, most small and frail, which had been sent from the Indies to gladden the heart of His Royal Highness by its youthful antics. At the foot of the stake lay sticks, red, and still smoking; and in the closet there was an evil smell of singed hair.

"The pretty beast had so cruelly suffered as it perished in this fire that its delicate frame seemed to be, not that of an animal that had lived, but rather the fragment of a wrinkled and twisted root; and in its mouth, that was open as though crying in the death agony, foam specked with blood was to be seen, and its face was still wet with tears.

"'Who has done this?' asked the Emperor.

"The tutor durst not reply, and both stood and spake not, being sad and wrathful.

"Suddenly, in this silence, the feeble sound of a cough was heard coming from a corner of the darkness behind them. His Majesty, turning round, perceived the infante Don Philip, clothed all in black and sucking a lemon.

"'Don Philip,' he said, 'come forth and salute me.'

"The infante did not stir, but looked at him with his timid eyes in which there was no love.

"'Hast *thou* burnt this little beast in this fire?' asked the Emperor.

"The infante bowed his head.

"But the Emperor spake again:

"'If thou in thy cruelty hast done this thing, have the courage to confess it.'

"The infante made no reply.

"His Majesty snatched the lemon from his hands, and cast it to the ground, and was about to beat his son, who was pissing with terror, but the Archbishop stayed his hand, whispering in his ear:

"'His Royal Highness will some day be a great burner of heretics.'

"The Emperor smiled, and both went out, leaving the infante alone with his she-monkey."

The vividness of this scene, with its vital detail of the lemon, will not be disputed, and picture after picture of this kind is flashed across the pages. There is no consecutive narrative, no painstaking stringing together of dates and events: this is a cinematograph show, not an ordered story. The variety is astounding; each episode is distinct; and the scene shifts from Flanders to Spain, from Brussels to Nuremberg. The lightness of touch is wonderful: the words seem to float in the short sentences, the rhythm is without a jolt.

The book had been eagerly expected, and it was adequately noticed when it at last appeared. But it was not a bookseller's success. It was an *édition de luxe*, enriched by the drawings of distinguished artists, Félicien Rops among others, and its price was prohibitive. Moreover it was in old French, and though this archaic diction had added a charm to the more legendary poetry or the more fantastic buffoonery of the *Légendes Flamandes*, in so long and ambitious a book as *Thyl Ulenspiegel* it proved an obstacle. It was not till the *Légende* was issued in a cheap edition by Paul Lacomblez in 1893 that it began to make headway. Camille Lemonnier calls the book "the Bible of the Flemings." This is Swinburnian praise. *Thyl Ulenspiegel* is to this day not widely known in France, where up to the present there has been a prejudice against all Belgian literature; in Belgium it is known but unread. To the Roman Catholics, of course, it is a work of the devil; to the *flamingants* it is poison, for it is in French. There only remain the Walloons and the freethinking Flemings to do justice to this great work; but it may be

doubted if to many even of them it is a "Bible." It is, perhaps, too long. It lacks unity—some of the episodes, for instance, which are taken from the *Till Eulenspiegel* chapbook, are quite extraneous. Then there are some allegorical chapters which glow with colour but lend themselves to interpretation somewhat as does the Book of Revelation. Only in one country has this prose epic been justly appreciated as a book to be read: the Germans, with their well-known logic, claim it as a *German* work, as a book which glorifies the sterling Germanic character (in the spirit of Pan-Germanism) and shows the wickedness and inferiority of the Latin races.

The book, then, did not definitely improve De Coster's financial position, and in 1870 he was glad to accept the professorship of history and French literature at the Military School in Brussels. His salary was ample; but it was so much booty for his creditors. Broken by misfortune and the work of a galley-slave, he died in 1879, at Ixelles, a suburb of Brussels, where in 1911 a monument was raised to him. At this ceremony Camille Lemonnier delivered the oration which is now

the preface to the third edition of *Thyl* (1912). Lemonnier's praise was burning with enthusiasm. "Love breathed," he said, "and the wind of battle arose, and carried everything away in the holy intoxication of creating a new native land! . . . Here a people died, and freed themselves; freed a soul that was tortured in vain by tyrants, a soul that, like fire, flames the higher the more it is repressed. Everywhere the stake, the wheel. . . . And yet the good song, the song of love and courage, ends never. It bursts forth as life does, like the soul of the bravest of nations. From the vaults of death itself it ascends and defies death. . . . It is the great lesson, never to despair. . . ."

CHAPTER II

THE STANDARD OF REVOLT

It has been said that from 1830 to 1880 Belgium "enjoyed liberty, tranquillity, and . . . sleep." There is point in the epigram, so far as concerns the intellectual activity of the general public. But the statement that Belgium before 1880 was "a literary desert," is not strictly correct. It would be correct to say that in the years in question Belgian literature was unknown outside of Belgium; it would be correct to say that what was good in Belgian literature was little read in Belgium itself before 1880. Before that year Belgian literary productivity was certainly meagre. Compared with any of the three Scandinavian countries, for instance, Belgian literature before 1880 had little claim to the attention of the world; and from the international point of view it might be said that of all the writers who were at their best between 1860 and 1880 only De Coster and Guido Gezelle

survive. It might of course be urged that these two writers were during their lifetime kept in the shade by such occasional and official versifiers as Louis Hymans, in whose epithalamium to the Princess Stéphanie the following stanza occurs:

> "Vous allez nous quitter, princesse,
> Pour devenir archiduchesse
> Et sur le trône des Habsbourg
> Faire asseoir le sang des Cobourg."

Charles Potvin is another favourite of those days; he is now hardly known except by what he did for De Coster. In the shade, however, fighting their way as literary hacks, or writing masterpieces (like Guido Gezelle) in utter renunciation, men of real genius were preparing the way for the new generation. Camille Lemonnier, the great path-finder, had plunged into journalism in 1863; and by 1875 the term "Jeune-Belgique," which was to be the watchword of the new movement, had appeared in *L'Artiste*, a review (edited by Théodore Hannon) which called for a programme of "naturalism and modernity."

It was at the University of Louvain that the new voices were first heard. Here in 1880 and

the following years a group of students were gathered together who were nearly all of them to become famous. One of them was Émile Verhaeren, already conspicuous by his *grande tignasse blonde* (shock of fair hair) and his long drooping moustache. Another, Iwan Gilkin, was so deeply moved when he first heard Verhaeren recite at the Literary Society of the University that he hurried off to his lodgings and there and then indited a sonnet to the elder student. This he promptly dropped into Verhaeren's letter-box, and was delighted the following morning to receive a return sonnet, equally complimentary. "In fourteen tortured lines," Gilkin relates, "I had said: 'You are a poet!' and Verhaeren responded in the same terms: 'You are another.' We were great friends after that."

The greatest light among the students, as they then considered, was Émile van Arenbergh, "an excellent young man, with a grave, slow voice, solemn gestures, and a soul candid and serene." Magnificent as his verse was his superb fur coat with a wide Astrakhan collar, clad in which he once appeared at the Police Court in the heats of July,

to answer for an escapade. The youngest of the group was Albert Giraud: he was about eighteen at the time. He was timid and nonchalant; but he spoke magnificently when he caught fire at the debates of the Literary Society—then, "the words leapt from his mouth like roaring lions."

Very intimate with the French-writing students was Albrecht Rodenbach. Born in 1856 at Roulers, he had been the pupil of Hugo Verriest at the Little Seminary in that town, which figures largely in the history of the Flemish revival. Before his arrival in Louvain, he had corresponded with another young Flemish-writing poet of great ambition, Pol de Mont, a native of Brabant (born near Ternath, 1857). Both looked far ahead to the same ideals of a great national literature in Flemish, and both wished to make a beginning of the revival by creating a strong Students' Union. In this they succeeded: the first meeting of Flemish students was held at Ghent in 1877, and by the time these two heralds of a revolution which was to run parallel with that of the French-writing students, and to have far-reaching political consequences, had

become fellow-students in Louvain, their first books had been launched. Albrecht Rodenbach's *Eerste Gedichten* (First Poems) had appeared at Roulers in 1878; Pol de Mont's first volume of verse, *Klimopkranksens*, had been published in 1876. Unfortunately, Albrecht Rodenbach died of consumption in 1880; his was the tragic fate, but also the immortality of regret, of Keats. He would never have been a great poet; he had no depth. But he had a boundless enthusiasm for the Flemish cause, and it is rather as the prophet of the Flemish revival, who might have led the chosen into the Promised Land, than as a poet that his memory is kept green. There is (or was, before the war) a statue to him in Roulers. Strange to say, there is a particularly virile note in the lyrics of this doomed consumptive, as in his ambitious verse play *Gudrun*, which appeared two years after his death. Albrecht Rodenbach's death left Pol de Mont the undisputed leader of the Flemish revival—a revival which he was to lead more and more in the direction of Germany. Another of the Flemish students who was to become a pillar of the movement was Jan Blockx, the

future director of the Conservatoire at Antwerp, and after Peter Benoît the greatest of Flemish musicians. He died in 1912.

These students, French and Flemish, lived the true Bohemian life. Pol de Mont and Albrecht Rodenbach, with their flowing locks and the practised poetic expression of their features, were a public spectacle when they took their afternoon constitutional through the town. As to the French-writing students, we know by Gilkin's confessions that they were addicted to "beer, coffee, punch, and hot wine." They studied in the summer holidays exclusively (most of them law, which they seem to have considered a great bore); and they passed their examinations (or failed in them) in October. Once they got into difficulties with the police by unearthing a signpost and carrying it through the streets of Louvain in the dead of night between a double row of lugubrious candles, while they sang *De profundis* and *Dies iræ*. This music may have been well worth listening to, for one of the singers was Ernest van Dyck, who was to become a famous Wagner tenor at Bayreuth. Verhaeren lodged in the third story in the house

of a cutler named Joris, and if a visitor called he would leap on to the landing and shout downstairs at the top of his voice: "Madame Joris! Madame Joris! A cup of tea, please!" Sometimes the visitors followed each other fast, but Verhaeren called for a cup of tea for each new-comer. The friends were careful not to suggest any alteration of this "immutable rite, which gave his lodgings something sacred." They lent books to one another, but Verhaeren could only be trusted with books of no value, on account of his "savage enthusiasms." When he was struck by a particularly fine passage he had a habit of screaming, "Nom de Dieu! que c'est beau!" (Good God! how fine it is!), and the volume would then bring the plaster down from the ceiling. This violent handling of books scandalised another member of the group, who was already possessed with a mania for collecting rare editions: this was Edmond Deman, who in the course of time became a celebrated bibliophile and publisher of beautiful books, including the first lovely editions of Verhaeren's books. "He is a Red Skin!" Deman used to say of Verhaeren in those days.

On the 18th of October 1879, in the streets of

Louvain the newsboys were crying a new students' magazine. This was *La Semaine des Étudiants*, and at first it sold like hot cakes. Its first verses, *Rimes d'avant-poste*, were signed "Rodolphe." This was the pen-name of Verhaeren, whose contributions show that at that time he was one of the least revolutionary of the group; he was inclined to imitate François Coppée, and the ideal he proclaimed was: to live peaceably in his village, near a river with a singing tide, to have wife and children. But one day he read Maupassant's *Vers*, and he wrote no more domestic idylls—from that moment he was a realist.

If Maupassant's volume of verse was the *coup de foudre* for Verhaeren, Baudelaire's *Fleurs de Mal* was the same thing for Iwan Gilkin. Albert Giraud made him read it at the critical moment; and through these two poets it was destined to turn a large part of the poetry of young Belgium into gloomy channels. It was Gilkin who, in the thirteenth number of *La Semaine des Étudiants*, signed a sensational manifesto. After pointing out that hitherto Belgian literature had looked to Paris for approval, and that no Belgian man of letters had been acknowledged

at home until he had been recognised in the French capital, he urges that the best way to create new things is to aim at local colour. Little matters as to the language, he says, whether it be lyrical or correct, Gothic, or French of Paris: all that is needed is that it should smack of the soil. Let it be wild and dishevelled; let it murder syntax and writhe in orgies of solecisms; what does it matter if it leaps at the throat of reality? Flanders and the Walloon provinces are there, offering their flanks swollen with delightful and curious customs. And when the first fire is calmed, there are golden legends to gather. There must be a Flemish school of poetry just as there was a Flemish school of painting; there must be poets in the manner of Teniers, Ruysdael, Brauwer, Van Ostade to begin with; and they must lead the way to a Rembrandt and a Rubens of verse.

We shall see that the programme was realised to the full. How startling it seemed at the time, however, is evident from the fact that Verhaeren, who was destined more than any one else to carry it out, sent in an article of timid protest against "the crimson excesses of this new doctrine that sought

to break through the dykes." But the aims of the new movement—"un petit quatre-vingt-neuf intellectuel," someone called it—were settled when another of the students, Ernst Verlant, who was later a critic of distinction and rose to be Directeur-Général des Beaux Arts, read a paper in which he tried to establish that the aim of art is the realisation of a moral and religious ideal. His arguments were refuted, and the formula was proclaimed which was to remain the first commandment in the programme of young Belgium: *l'Art pour l'Art* (Art for Art's sake). The adoption of this doctrine was too much for the University. The conservative students began to look upon the plotters as the agents of Satan. Wordy battles raged. Peace was restored for a moment, however, when a young Belgian author, Albrecht Rodenbach's elder brother and an old schoolfellow of Verhaeren's, paid a visit to the University to recite his poems. This was Georges Rodenbach, who had already had some of his verse published in Paris.

La Semaine des Étudiants had not attained a great age when, on their return from the summer vacation, the iconoclasts heard the newsboys crying:

"*Le Type!* Buy *Le Type!*" What was their horror on finding that this new magazine was an exact copy of their own, printed by their own printer, and displaying the advertisements they themselves had captured! They found another printer, and attacked the new-comer, especially its editor, a certain Olivier, with might and main. But *Le Type* asked for nothing better than war to the knife. The combat deepened; other magazines were launched to join in the fray; and in the beginning of 1881 the University authorities were forced to suppress them all.

The abominable Olivier was a mystery. At last his true name was discovered. "He was quite a young man, almost a boy, handsome as a dream, charming, brilliant, exquisite in his waggishness and grace: his name was Maurice Warlomont."

A few months later a new magazine appeared, this time at Brussels. Maurice Warlomont, henceforth to be known by his pen-name of Max Waller, had acquired an interest in *La Jeune Revue*, a magazine of the students of Brussels, and had rechristened it *La Jeune Belgique*. He had at once

recruited Georges Rodenbach, Verhaeren, Giraud, Gilkin, Georges Eekhoud, Franz Mahutte, Henri Maubel; and with these contributors, who entered literature, says Vance Thompson, like a band of Sioux, the review soon became the chief organ of the new literary life.

But the doctrine of Art for Art's sake which was preached by *La Jeune Belgique* did not pass without challenge. Edmond Picard, already a lawyer of great reputation, opposed the maxim by his ideas of a "social" or "revolutionary" art, of a "useful art" (*l'art utile*). The mission of art, he claimed, was to destroy the abuses of a decadent society, to clear the way for the flood-tide which was to submerge all that was effete. This was the programme of Picard's organ *L'Art Moderne*. Between *La Jeune Belgique* and *L'Art Moderne* there was war open and declared. In 1884 Picard's organ began to attack the writers of *La Jeune Belgique* as "Parnassians." This was equivalent to charging them with being mock-Parisians. Against this alleged tendency *L'Art Moderne* decreed that art should be national, that a Belgian writer should think as a Belgian and write as a

Belgian. At least one duel was fought, and the two parties proved irreconcilable.

The writers of *La Jeune Belgique* had no objection to being called Parnassians: they considered that they, like the French Parnassians of 1866, were fighting "a literary amorphism produced by the exaggeration of moral, philanthropic, social, and political preoccupations." They definitely affirmed the relationship by the publication in 1887 of an anthology of their verse: *Le Parnasse de la Jeune Belgique.* This book, published at Paris by Léon Vanier, is one of the landmarks of modern Belgian literature. It is more than an anthology, it is, and was intended to be, a proof paramount of the actual existence of a new school of poetry in Belgium. It is to be noted that it includes poems by writers who were afterwards avowed symbolists—André Fontainas, Charles van Lerberghe, Grégoire Le Roy, and Maurice Maeterlinck. The directors of *La Jeune Belgique*, however, were not favourably disposed to the symbolists. Max Waller, the first editor, refused to print *vers libres* and looked on Verhaeren as a man lost and strayed. Waller died in 1889, and was succeeded by Henri Maubel, who

adhered to the policy established by the first editor. The policy of excluding the symbolists, however, was not approved of by all the directors, who were now Georges Eekhoud, Albert Giraud, Francis Nautet, Henri Maubel, and Iwan Gilkin. There were disputes; and Valère Gille, the youngest poet who had contributed to *Le Parnasse*, was appointed editor. He was only twenty-three at the time. Under his auspices the review was thrown open to all and sundry, and *vers libres* by the French and Belgian symbolists were accepted. In 1891 Gille resigned, and was succeeded by Gilkin, who reversed Gille's policy, and in 1893 issued a new manifesto calling upon his countrymen to practise *le culte de la forme.* Gilkin, and those who supported him, were of opinion that the proximity of Flemish made it most difficult for Belgians to keep their French pure, and that their only salvation lay in the cultivation of a French free from all provincial disfiguration. Gilkin, it is evident, had reached quite a different standpoint from that which had inspired his manifesto in *La Semaine des Étudiants.* He and his party had now come to the conclusion that, as far as literature was concerned,

they were Frenchmen, not Belgians. They would have nothing to do with anything that suggested local conditions. They were determined to look upon themselves as French writers inhabiting Brussels, Ghent, or Liége, instead of Paris, Lyons, or Marseilles. The foreign elements which, owing to the number of symbolist poets of foreign extraction, were forcing their way into French literature, they regarded as harmful, and they fought against them with more determination than even those French critics of Paris who were the defenders of the classical tradition. The result was a splitting of Belgian poetry into two schools: Gilkin, Giraud, Gille, Séverin, and others were "Parnassians"; Verhaeren, Maeterlinck, van Lerberghe, Fontainas, Elskamp, and others were *vers libristes* and symbolists. The Parnassians rallied round *La Jeune Belgique*, while the *vers libristes* and symbolists wrote for *L'Art Moderne* and several dissident reviews, the most important of which was Albert Mockel's *La Wallonie*.

Four of the best poets, Verhaeren, Georges Rodenbach, Georges Eekhoud, and Georges Khnopff, had refused to contribute to *Le Parnasse*,

so that the anthology does not represent the whole poetic movement, but it is nevertheless a most interesting book, full of virility and wickedness, in the midst of which the more delicate notes of Maeterlinck, Charles van Lerberghe, and Fernard Séverin seem out of place. The prevailing mood is a Baudelairian pessimism: hardly one of the poets but shows who has stood godfather to his muse.

Some of the eighteen contributors are now, it is true, poets of yesteryear.

Théodore Hannon is one of those minor poets who are consistently ignored or curtly treated by the decent historians of literature, but who have always an intelligent public among the collectors of curios. Take away his obscenity and little remains; but his obscenity is not vicious, it is merely a graceful play with words; Hannon is not perverse, he is naughty. His licentious images conjure up exotic pictures: as that of lemons bursting through thin paper, which make him think of the pale gold breasts of Japanese girls.

Max Waller's *Flûte à Siebel* is poor stuff by the side of Théodore Hannon's *Rimes de Joie.* The

two books are similar in intention; but whereas Hannon's obscenity is that of an artist, Waller's is the sneering cynicism of a man about town.

Émile van Arenbergh is to be taken more seriously, though of him, too, it cannot be claimed that he is any longer read or considered at the value he once seemed to have. He might be called a Philistine Baudelaire: he has the pessimism, but only as much of the perversity of Baudelaire as a judge—he was a *juge de paix*—can decently make a show of. His sonnets have an imposing frontage. Seen from afar, they have the Heredian build; but on closer inspection the stones are seen to have been dug out from here and there, not hewn from one block; and they are loose. Fragments are often richly coloured, but with the learned tints of Gautier, not with the mellow tones of the native Flemish colouring.

Valère Gille has suffered still more from time. He is a kind of miniature Edmund Gosse; he is rather a librarian than a poet. His verse has distinction, but it is a distinction of form; and the fact that his collection *La Cithare* (1897) was crowned by the French Academy is a terrible

incrimination of the French Academy. However, some of his sonnets, derivative as they are, are well-knit, and spread the peacock's tail with sufficient pomp.

Who that reads the charming Walloon tales of George Garnir, remembers that he was one of the poets of the *Parnasse?* How many Dutch people are aware that their favourite poetess Hélène Swarth began with French poetry in a Belgian anthology? Who in these days knows the name of Léon Montenaeken? Who, in England and all over the world, does not know his little lyric, which is to be found in the *Parnasse?*

> "La vie est vaine :
> Un peu d'amour,
> Un peu de haine . . .
> Et puis—bonjour !
>
> "La vie est brève :
> Un peu d'espoir,
> Un peu de rêve . . .
> Et puis—bonsoir !"

The poets of yesteryear do not wholly die. . . .

CHAPTER III

CAMILLE LEMONNIER

Every five years the Belgian state awards a prize for the best book which has appeared during the five years preceding. In 1883 the jury decided that during the previous half decade no work of sufficient merit had appeared to justify their awarding the prize. This decision was considered by the young writers of Belgium, who were by this time both numerous and conscious of their own importance, to be a deliberate insult to Camille Lemonnier, for in the period in question he had published four novels, two of which at all events, *Un Mâle* and *Le Mort*, could not possibly by good critics be rated as anything less than masterpieces. It was felt that the time was come to show Lemonnier that he had a following among his more intelligent countrymen, and that he was no longer a voice crying in the wilderness. On the 27th of May 1883 a public banquet was offered to

him at Brussels; eloquent speeches were made; the newspapers thrashed out the question of the national literature; in short, a sensation was created. This historic banquet, known henceforth as *le banquet du Mâle*, marks another stage of progress in modern Belgian literature; for the first time the literary men of the country had acted as a body and publicly challenged the Philistines, who for so long had kept literature and intellectual life in a position of dependence on the crassest conception of public morality. Henceforth authors claimed the liberty of writing as they thought fit, without consideration of the tender susceptibilities of those who would fain have gagged all free utterance and only allowed literary expression in a pruned and official language. As to Camille Lemonnier, he went on writing as he had always done, luxuriantly and without restraint; but when the time came again for the jury to hold their momentous deliberations, they could no longer afford to ignore the man who had come to be known to the Belgians as their "field-marshal of letters," and in 1888 Lemonnier was awarded the quinquennial prize, not, it is true, for his fine

novels *L'Hystérique* or *Happe-Chair*, but for *La Belgique* (1888), his monumental itinerary of Belgium. And even this was not allowed to be given as a prize in schools—it was "too lyrical," the official verdict ran.

In all Belgian literature there is no more outstanding figure than Camille Lemonnier. He is not merely the greatest Belgian novelist, he is the greatest Belgian prose-writer; and even if he had been a lesser artist, if he had lost ground to the sustained fierceness of Georges Eekhoud, or been out-classed by the subtle imagination and the exquisite refinement of Eugène Demolder, he would still have loomed large as a great fighter for the recognition of Belgian literature, as the general, in short, who set the young men of letters on their feet and led them to victory. "He alone perhaps," says Edmond Picard, "symbolises the Belgian literary activity in the French language in its entirety. He was the centre of it, the trunk, the backbone: nearly everything has issued forth from him, or directly or indirectly leaned on him."

Camille Lemonnier, the son of a lawyer who hailed from Louvain, was born at Ixelles near

Brussels in 1844. The name is Walloon, but both father and mother were Flemish. A glance at his genealogy, however, shows that he is of mixed extraction: his great-grandmother on his father's side was an Italian. As a schoolboy at the Athénée of Brussels, he showed little aptitude for study; but he learned Baudelaire's poems by heart. Soon afterwards he heard Baudelaire, then in exile in Brussels, lecture on Théophile Gautier: it was his first glimpse of that tangible distress of literature which he was to experience to the full. His first newspaper article brought him the friendship of another of the victims of literature—Charles De Coster, whose great champion he was to be. He entered the University of Brussels as a student of jurisprudence; but his incapacity in this sphere was so evident that his father removed him and procured him a post as a clerk in the provincial government of Brussels. From this still more uncongenial employment he ran away when he was twenty-two, determined to live by his pen. He began by writing art criticism for the newspapers; this he collected in his first book *Salon de Bruxelles*, which he was enabled

by the generous assistance of a wealthy friend to publish in 1863. This book of art criticism was to be followed by several others, chief among them being *Histoire des Beaux-Arts en Belgique* (1887) and *Les Peintres de la Vie* (1888).

His father died when he was twenty-five. With the money he inherited Lemonnier rented a château on the hills near Namur, and here for some time he lived the life which suited his robust constitution and unbridled instincts, the life which he has described in a number of his novels, in *Un Mâle* above all, but also in *Amants Joyeux* and in the novels of forest life which preach a return to the primitive conditions of nature. " Born by mistake between the walls of a great city," says Georges Rency, " Lemonnier had at last found his true homeland. It was a kind of initiation for him. In the little domain which extended round his rustic dwelling were gathered together the delights of a noble river and the sturdy, stinging pleasures of the forest. He was a hunter, an angler, and a poacher. He lived through all the excitement of his *Mâle* before he dreamt of writing it down. He intoxicated himself with nature, drank it, ate his

fill of it. And when his purse was empty and he was forced to return to a normal existence, he tore himself away from this wild and splendid country with a despair and bitterness that never left him."

During this period of untrammelled life in the open Lemonnier wrote *Nos Flamands* (1869), a series of aggressive essays full of enthusiasm for the great men of his race, a fiery appeal for a national regeneration which for the moment fell on deaf ears, but had its effect when the time was ripe ten years later. The book is dedicated to "the young men of our schools and workshops," and it bears the motto: "Nous-mêmes ou périr!" (Let us be ourselves, or perish!) a battle-cry which was to be taken up with resounding vigour when the fight for a national literature began in earnest. The next formative force in Lemonnier's life was the Franco-German War, which inspired him with the pamphlet *Paris-Berlin*, an eloquent pleading of the cause of France. It had an enormous success, and was attributed to Victor Hugo, "who did not protest."[1] Lemonnier expressed his horror of war in a book of more permanent import, *Les*

[1] A. Mockel, *Mercure de France*, April 1897.

Charniers (1871), which has been described as forming, with Baroness von Suttner's *Down with your Arms* and Zola's *La Débâcle*, "a triptych of horror." "There is only one thing I execrate," says Lemonnier in this book, "and that is war. This hatred in me is as indestructible as my soul."

Les Charniers, Lemonnier's first masterpiece, may be said to open his first creative period. Léon Bazalgette, in his authoritative monograph,[1] divides Lemonnier's work into three distinct periods. "The first, in which there triumphs a rich and opulent art, uncompromising and swollen with sap, plastic above all, filled his youth from twenty to forty. The second, dominated by the quest of originality and an inquiring and experimental psychology, is the result of his maturity, from his fortieth to his fiftieth year. At fifty he returns to the instinct of his youth, but to an instinct which, having traversed all the experiences of a lifetime, now appears enriched, fortified, more supple and wider of range, controlled by an unerring will—a

[1] *Camille Lemonnier* (one of the series *Les Célébrités d'Aujourd'hui*), Paris, Sansot, 1904.

magnificent period of plenitude and of triumphant fecundity, an age of re-birth ripening some of the noblest fruits of his art."

The fine flower of the first period is *Un Mâle*, which appeared in 1881, and at once placed Lemonnier in the first rank of contemporary novelists. It is the novel by which he is best known: he wrote some sixty books, but to the major part of the reading public he is "the author of *Un Mâle*." There would be no risk in saying that this is the best, as it certainly is the most famous Belgian novel. But it is more than a novel, it is a lyric ecstasy, a poem in prose, a panegyric of forest and farm, a litany of instinct. The book, which was written at a farm, opens with a wonderful description of dawn in an orchard, where Cachaprès, a poacher famed far and wide for his prowess and agility, has spent the night. When he awakens he sees, from where he lies, the farmer's daughter, Germaine, opening her bedroom window. "Then something extraordinary happened. He looked at her, with his great teeth bared. On his cheeks there was a broad, cajoling smile, and his eyes seemed lost in a mist. A beast

awoke in him, wild and tender." The story follows up the pursuit and the capture of this sturdy wench; but the love events are not more exciting than the detailed description of the poacher's life in the forest, his snaring of animals by night, his daring excursions to the neighbouring town to dispose of the game he has killed, his hairbreadth escapes from the gamekeepers who are on his track. It is all realism; but the realism is mellowed with poetry.

There are many things in *Un Mâle* which the memory will not let go. There are the *kermesse* scenes, full of gluttony and lust. There is a Homeric description of a fight in an inn: every phase stands out with the vigour of Meissonier's *Une Rixe.* But all the interest centres round Cachaprès in his defiant and full-blooded outlawry. "Some folks chop wood," he says to Germaine, "others plough; some have trades. I'm fond of animals." Brute as he is, he is a fascinating character, modelled to the mystery of the forest; and when the nets of his fate close round him, when at last he is hunted down and hit by the bullet of a gendarme, the novel gathers all the

elemental force of a great and inevitable tragedy. He drags himself through the briars of a thicket to die as a wounded beast might die; and in his death-throes he is tended by a ragged little wench who has grown up like a squirrel in the woods and has helped him in his poaching. He has hardly noticed the little thing; but she with her wild heart has loved him. She will not leave him.

"She thought he was asleep and called out to him; he did not stir. She touched his skin, lightly: it was already hard and horribly cold. Then she flew into a rage and shook him as hard as she could. His body, as stiff as stone, moved like a lump of something. What was the matter with him? She bent down over him, put her arms round him, kissed him with her hot lips, and felt as though a wave of love flooded her.

"She had come across dead animals lying in her path, and they had been stiff like this. . . . She did not shed a tear. She crouched by his body, put her thin arms round his neck, and all day long she lay with her face to his, plunging her sharp and crazy eyes into his glassy eyeballs. She looked at him with stupefaction. And then she caressed him again with her burning hands. What did it matter if he *was* dead, now that he was hers. The sly stirrings of her virginity, which she had had to hide from him when he was alive, now cast off all restraint on this unresisting corpse. Emboldened by the dead

man's consent, she fondled him, pressed him to her with a savage tenderness, without horror or disgust.

"At nightfall a wild cat appeared, attracted by the smell. She drove it away with stones. Then crows perched on a neighbouring tree and croaked there, as grave as judges pronouncing judgment. She screamed to frighten them away. She returned to the hut, but said nothing to her parents, jealously keeping her secret for herself, and when morning dawned she went back to him.

"When some days had passed, she saw a horrible thing: the wound was slowly moving, with a slow undulation that never stopped. . . .

"She screamed, and fell flat on her hands, with her head in the grass."

Sad and terrible as the ending of *Un Mâle* is, it is not a depressing book. It is saturated with health; it throbs with virility; and it has the inspiriting force of all healthy and virile things. *Le Mort*, on the other hand, has the statuesque lugubriousness of a *Dance of Death*. *Le Mort* is just as much a hymn to Death as *Un Mâle* is a hymn to Life. To this extent they are companion volumes—the medal and its reverse. *Le Mort* appeared a year after *Un Mâle*, in 1882. It is the long drawn-out agony of remorse of two

brothers, who have been driven by avarice to murder.

The psychological series opens with *L'Hystérique* (1885). This, the best of the series as well as the first, is the lurid story of the guilty love of a perverted priest for one of his flock, an anæmic girl whose retarded puberty, breaking forth at last when she has whipped herself into ecstasies of religious fervour, plunges her into mystic hallucinations, in the spasms of which she believes that her seducer is Jesus. Splendidly drawn is the figure of the cleric, with his sexual disgrace motived by his descent from the Spanish conquerors of Flanders. This priest, however, is not wholly guilty of his hellish crimes; there is a note of discreet sympathy in the characterisation. It is the system, the cloistering, which is wrong—this strong man, who is overcome by his blood and the hypnotic suggestiveness of the rising sap in springtime, might have been a stalwart soldier, a headlong man of action.

L'Hystérique was followed by *Happe-Chair* (1886), a documented study of the life of workers in rolling-mills. This novel, which owes something to Meunier's plastic art, has often been compared

with Zola's *Germinal*, but according to Bazalgette Lemonnier's novel was "historically anterior." *Germinal* had, however, appeared the year before; and *Happe-Chair* is dedicated to Zola. It would be hard to prove that Lemonnier was not directly influenced, in the novels of his second period, by Zola. There is, for one thing, the exaltation of the *milieu* into a grandiose symbol. The life of the *béguinage*, sordid, and centred in creature comforts, in *L'Hystérique* is not excessively enforced; but in *Happe-Chair* the rolling-mill is as much an obsession as the coal-mine is in *Germinal*. Nevertheless, Lemonnier does not belong with a disciple's devotion to the school of Médan; he follows the lead, but with independence. He is less pedantic; he is more alive. It is difficult for him to keep the poet down: where his work is Zolaesque, it reminds one of *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*, that intense poem. The only novels of Lemonnier which can fairly be censured as being in Zola's unpleasant manner are *Madame Lupar* (1888) and *La Fin des Bourgeois* (1892).

In 1888 Lemonnier was fined one thousand francs and costs in Paris for his short story

L'Enfant du Crapaud, which had appeared in *Gil Blas*, to which he contributed many of the short stories collected in various volumes. *L'Enfant du Crapaud* was reprinted in *Ceux de la Glèbe* (1889), perhaps Lemonnier's best collection of short stories, with its description of the dragging horror of the lives of those who till the soil. *L'Enfant du Crapaud* was condemned in spite of the eloquence of Edmond Picard, who had gone to Paris to defend his fellow-countryman. Lemonnier was not frightened into modifying his realistic method, and the next novel of his which appeared, *Le Possédé* (1890), might not unreasonably have shocked conservative minds, although in justice to Lemonnier it must be said that he was never a pornographer—he was merely a great writer who, at all events during this psychological period which stretches from *L'Hystérique* to *La Faute de Madame Charvet*, thought it his duty to dive into the motive forces of disease and perversion and to describe life as he found it, without palliation. Realism and Satanism were the fashion, that is all; and Lemonnier in his prose went no farther than, for instance, Iwan Gilkin in his verse. *Le Possédé* shows the genesis

and rapid growth of perverted sex instincts in an old man, a magistrate who has lived honourably till his fiftieth year.

A few years later Lemonnier was again prosecuted for immoral writing, this time at Brussels. He was defended by Edmond Picard again, aided by the novelist Henry Carton de Wiart; and he was acquitted. It was again a short story which had given offence, *L'Homme qui tue les Femmes* (reprinted in *Dames de Volupté*, 1892), quite a harmless presentation of the crimes of Jack the Ripper. Lemonnier was prosecuted for the third time, at Bruges, for the publication of *L'Homme en Amour* (1897); and he was acquitted in triumph, the occasion being seized by his friends and sympathisers to do honour to his art. *L'Homme en Amour* and *Le Possédé* are really variations of the same theme; but the later novel is more universal in its application, and more in the nature of a protest against the atrophy of the sex instinct. It forms a diptych with another novel of protest, Georges Eekhoud's *Escal-Vigor*. The trial at Bruges inspired Lemonnier with *Les Deux Consciences*, an avowedly autobiographical novel in

which he pleads his own case against his judges and justifies his literary method. Lighter in texture is *Claudine Lamour* (1893), the history of a Parisian music-hall star. *L'Arche* (1894), a fireside idyll, a glorification of motherhood and family life, points forward to the noble novels of the third period. It is a feminist novel, eloquent of the great future in store for woman when her emancipation is complete. *La Faute de Madame Charvet* (1895) is the opposite picture to *L'Arche:* ruthlessly it exposes the naked bones of adultery.

Now a new period, Lemonnier's third period, begins. It is as though he were sick of the depravities he has been painting with such conscientious truth, as though he had turned his back on perversion and adultery and taken refuge in the haunts of his youth, in the open country, at the heart of the forest. He is again the Lemonnier who wrote *Un Mâle;* but chastened by his long pilgrimage through the labyrinth of dingy streets and with a new message intense as the religion of an apostle. This message has all the freshness, in his glowing presentation of it, of a new and miraculous discovery; and yet it is essentially

Rousseau's preaching of the return to nature, to instinct. There is no pretence of "philosophy": Lemonnier does nothing more than expound a view of life which amounts to a robust futurism. He writes *L'Île Vierge* (1897), which was to be the first part of a trilogy showing the progress of man through tribulation to the consciousness of divinity. Here Lemonnier had intended to lead up to the same conception of the man-god as informs the later work of Verhaeren and Maeterlinck. No other part of the trilogy was completed—perhaps the plan seemed too deliberate to Lemonnier, who was first and foremost an artist impelled by the mood of the moment, and always more attached to the character than to the idea. But in *Adam et Ève* (1899) the legend is continued—a man who has suffered greatly flees to the forest, and finds calm and content in the physical activity of primitive existence. There is the spirit of *Robinson Crusoe* in *Adam et Ève;* in *Au Cœur Frais de la Forêt* (1900) there is the witchery of *The Blue Lagoon.* Two waifs, a boy and a girl, find their way from the slums of a city to the heart of a mythical forest; here they learn to use their hands and

their brains; here they have their first child, and from here they set forth to found the ideal city of the future.

If in this series of novels there is one tendency more evident than another, it is the tendency to socialism—not the socialism of parties, but a doctrine of brotherly affection and of the nobility of labour, an intuition of the future. Socialism is thrust openly into the foreground in *Le Vent dans les Moulins* (1901). This is more a poem than a novel: it is a hymn to "Mother Flanders." This Flanders, however, is not defined by names and drawn with clear-cut lines: it is all a dream-land, a land drowned in mists, a land of shy and awkward dreamers, a land of kitchen gardens and orchards, creeping canals, farms with green shutters and red-tiled roofs, roads that run between lines of poplars, with the river Lys meandering through the landscape. What a different country is this to that painted with opulent colour in the early novels, that country of teeming fertility and ruthless violence! The characters, too, have grown gentle; they are another race. Even the militant socialists, who, at the bidding of the gentry, are

attacked with stones at their meetings, have more of milk and honey than of gall.

Le Vent dans les Moulins is Flemish through and through: it is informed, not by French realism, but by Flemish mysticism. These taciturn peasants, who "are shaken to the marrow by life and yet say things which belie the force of their emotion," are akin to those of Stijn Streuvels. A Fleming to the core is the hero, Dries Abeels, the son of a flax merchant. Dries is a socialist; but he is also a *rentier*. The intention is fixed in his heart to give all he has to the poor; he is convinced that it is his duty to learn some manual trade and live by the exercise of it, as those do who live and toil around him. But, well-nourished as he is, with his "bullock's blood," he is fond of good eating; he is idle; he does not like early rising. In the end his better nature prevails; he shakes his sloth away, rises heroically before the sun, and binds himself apprentice to a carpenter. What follows is a healthy glorification of manual labour, as in the other novels of this period. He is no longer Dries the gentleman of means; he is

Dries the carpenter—and a good carpenter at that, for he works with love, reading poems into the wood he handles. Now he is conscious that "the man who does not work has no right to the bread he eats." Now, and now only, he has the right to preach socialism to the labourers—a hard task, even when fortified by personal example: for clergy and gentry are leagued against progress, and to teach the dignity and the rights of labour is like driving nails into beechwood.

There is scarcely a hint of sensual things in *Le Vent dans les Moulins*. There is a love story; but it is one of great restraint and chastity. The novels of primitive life at the heart of the forest are pure in intention; but their very purpose, the hymning of natural life, leads to scenes of initiation and marital passion. *Le Vent dans les Moulins* ends with an engagement which is likely to be long; and with Dries content to wait for his little housekeeper. Equally pure in tone is *Le Petit Homme de Dieu* (1902). It may be called a companion volume of *Le Vent dans les Moulins;* both are "local" novels, hymning the soul of Flanders. But whereas *Le Vent dans les Moulins* generalises the landscape,

Le Petit Homme de Dieu centres in one dead city—in Furnes-la-Marine (Furnes by the Sea), with its old church of Saint Walburga, its old houses, and its age-old customs. The dominant picture is that of the *Ommegang*, the procession which from time immemorial has been seen every year in Furnes—the chief inhabitants proceed through the town in solemn state, clad as New Testament figures. Georges Rency has described the ceremony:

> "Amid a great crowd of simple folks, fishermen and farmers, pass in procession the characters of the Gospels. The Wise Kings from the East are there, seeking the stable of Bethlehem. Herod and his courtiers are plotting the death of Jesus. Mary Magdalene displays her beauty and her jewels. Christ himself appears, mounted on a she-ass, among palms and hailed by cries of 'Hosanna!' Farther on he appears a second time, bending under his cross, halting at all the stages of Calvary. Finally, the chariot of the Ascension shows him soaring in glory eternal. Penitents, male and female, barefoot and in cowls, moan as they bear their gallows."

The old city is described with meticulous accuracy, with the quaint realism of old Flemish *genre* pictures. But mysticism, not realism, emanates

from the whole. The *Ommegang* has a subtle influence: the influence which the Passion Play has on the villagers of Oberammergau:

> "In this strange little town of Furnes, people never knew exactly in what period things were happening: all the events of the day took on a sacred appearance."

The characters call one another by the names of the personages they represent: thus, the locksmith is Pilate to his cronies in his very shop, and the Wise Kings from the East cannot divest themselves of their regal dignity even when they sit down to their beer in the inn. But the one who is most conscious of his sacred character is Ivo Mabbe, the little ropemaker who takes the part of Jesus and is for that reason known as "Le Petit Homme de Dieu." In the intensity of his simple piety he grows close to the mind of the Saviour, so close that he begins to identify himself with the part he plays. This phase of religious mania has often been described: by Gerhart Hauptmann among others in *The Apostle* and *The Fool in Christ Emanuel Quint*. Hauptmann's Christs are mad: Ivo is merely on the way

to madness. He only takes Christ's teaching literally, and shocks his fellow-townsmen, who are nothing if not "respectable," by associating with outcasts, to whom he preaches the Gospel, which in his mouth is identical with socialism. But the good burghers of Furnes do not approve of socialism, which to their minds is very far removed from Christianity. They turn against "the little Christ-man":

> "Since the day when for the first time he had gone into these slums and alleys, every one had turned against him. Herod told him clearly that he was running the risk of losing the esteem of decent people. Pilate, the locksmith, had reproached him for bothering about things which did not concern him. Some of the doctors of the Temple laughed at him from the threshold of their doors when he was passing, and even Joseph, the carpenter, a holy man, avoided him."

Ivo grows the more determined in his Christianity, and he persists in his ministrations to the outcast of the earth, considering that he has the right to repeat Christ's words. This extreme Christianity of his, however, as he comes to see, degenerates into a moral pride. In the end he realises that he is not and cannot be Christ; and

that he must first of all practise humility. Now he returns to Cordula, the rich farmer's daughter from the dunes, who had long been betrothed to him, but whom he had kept at a distance because she played the part of Mary Magdalene (how could Christ marry the sinner?).

Another novel of Lemonnier's, *La Chanson du Carillon*, has its scene in a dead city, in Bruges. Of his other novels *Le Sang et les Roses* (1901) should be mentioned. The theme is daring: a childless husband agrees to let his wife be loved by another man, for the sake of the child she desires and for which her nature cries out.

Lemonnier was not a French novelist. He was essentially a *Flemish* novelist: he is as much the novelist of Flanders as Verhaeren is the poet of Flanders. Not that he situated his novels entirely in Flemish districts: in such novels as *Happe-Chair* he has described the Walloons, and painted Walloon scenes with perfect precision. But his whole character was Flemish, violently Flemish, both in the realism of the earlier novels and the mysticism of those which came later. Lemonnier travelled little, only in France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany.

His impressions of Germany he described in *En Allemagne*, which contains valuable art criticism of the galleries in Munich. Even when he had become famous in Paris, when he was acknowledged in Paris as one of the most distinguished of French writers, he continued to live in Brussels, a guide, counsellor, and friend to the tyros of literature, encouraging the diffident to plunge into the whirlpool, instilling his own breezy courage into those who drew back.

Lemonnier was a great optimist. But, unlike Verhaeren and Maeterlinck, he had not to pass through a stage of pessimism. His optimism was a part of his constitution; it is the optimism of a healthy man.

Camille Lemonnier died in June 1913. He was buried in the fulness of summer, on a hot day, and the roses that covered his coffin scented the streets, says George Rency, long after the procession had passed.

CHAPTER IV

GEORGES EEKHOUD

In poultry-fancying circles there has of late years been a boom in the Campine fowl, a small, handsome bird with lovely eyes. Most of its admirers know that it is a Belgian fowl, but few realise that it keeps some of the qualities of the pheasant because it is by nature a moorland fowl, a native of the Campine (in Flemish, Kempen), that vast stretch of rusty heather and golden broom which lies above Antwerp, Malines, and Louvain — a region "desolate, but full of character."

Half the province of Antwerp and more than half of the province of Limburg belong to the Campine. The few railway lines which cross it have made little change in its old-world character, and in the pagan savagery of its inhabitants. The little towns are far scattered—Herenthals (the capital), Diest, Sichem, Averbode. Round the hamlets, oases of green with church spires piercing

the sky like bayonets, graze thin cattle, tied to posts lest they should sicken by eating too much of the spurrey which in this desolate region takes the place of grass and clover. Many hamlets are unconnected by regular roads, but some sort of communication is kept up by a service of lumbering carts drawn by bullocks. The sandy wastes are sucked down by spongy fens and blown into hillocks held together by starved, reddish heather and bristling broom and furze. Here and there rise stunted larches and struggling fir plantations. The mystery of these waste lands with their black walls of pinewoods, their malignant mazes of paths, their wrinkled ponds, and their incendiary sunsets in copper skies, has been magically described by Verhaeren in his poem "Silence"; and it is the country which Georges Eekhoud has seized for his own, as Thomas Hardy has seized Wessex.

"The country I love best," says Eekhoud in *Les Kermesses*, "does not exist for any tourist, and doctors will never recommend it. In this certainty my jealous and selfish fervour takes heart. Worn by the weather, the prey of fogs, are these plains of mine. Except for the *schorres* of the polder, the region fertilised by the alluvia of the Scheldt, few of its corners have been

cleared for cultivation. One canal, starting from the Scheldt, irrigates its heather-grown wastes and farmed patches, and hardly a railway connects its unknown townships with the outer world. The politician execrates it, the merchant despises it, and it frightens and bewilders the legion of poor painters. The population remains robust, shy, obstinate, and ignorant. No music moves me as the Flemish tongue does in their mouths. They speak it with a rhythmical drawl, feeding its guttural syllables abundantly, and its rude consonants fall as heavy as their fists. Their movements are slow and well-poised; they are broad-backed and chubby-cheeked, sanguine, taciturn. I have never met plumper wenches, with firmer chests or more challenging eyes than the wenches have in this country. The lads in their blue smocks have a determined swagger. In their drinking-bouts they slash away with their knives. At the *kermesse* they gorge and swill with a kind of awkward solemnity and pursue their women folks with no pretence of decency. . . .

"They cling to the faith of their fathers, go on pilgrimages, honour their priest, believe in the devil, in spell-casting, and in the evil hand, that *jettatura* of the north."

Georges Eekhoud was born in 1854 in Antwerp. His father, an official in an Insurance Company, was a Fleming; his mother was the daughter of a German married to a Dutch woman.

The father's character and early death have been described by his son, with great tenderness, in "Ex-Voto," one of the short stories in *Les Kermesses.* The boy was eleven when his father died, and he was sent to school in Switzerland. His school-life here, where he acquired a good knowledge of German, English, and Italian, he has described in various parts of his work, particularly in "Climatérie," one of the short stories collected in *Mes Communions*, and in *Escal-Vigor.* His schooling finished, his uncle, a candle-manufacturer and the mayor of Borgerhout, near Antwerp, tried to make an engineer of him. This plan failing, the boy was sent to the Military School, but after six months he ran away. The uncle now refused to have anything more to do with him, but, as his guardian, he let him have the interest on his father's estate, about a hundred francs a month. Not being able to make both ends meet with this pittance, Eekhoud joined the staff of an Antwerp newspaper. All his relations had cast him off; but after a time his grandmother, a rich woman, relented, and took him into her house. Here his life was free from care; and it was a great forma-

tive period, for he had the opportunity of regular intercourse with painters and poets, and he had leisure to read, and see life. These events of his boyhood and youth are evidently described with considerable truth in *La Nouvelle Carthage*, which is certainly an autobiographical novel.

In 1878 Eekhoud's grandmother died and left him a considerable fortune. His great desire had been to be a gentleman farmer; and he made haste to purchase an estate in the north of Antwerp, in the village of Cappellen, between the polders of the Scheldt and the wastes of the Campine. Here he hunted and lived the true squire's life, visited all the *kermesses*, and acquired that intimate knowledge of peasants and rural customs which he turned to such good account in his stories. But his farming was a disastrous failure; and he was soon without means again. He went to Brussels and joined the staff of the *Étoile Belge* as musical and literary critic. This was in 1881, just at the time when the new men were gathering there and beginning their campaign. Eekhoud became a firm friend of Théodore Hannon and Camille Lemonnier, and

with them he contributed to *La Bohème*, a little review which had a short life. Soon, however, Max Waller and his fighting men arrived from Louvain—the men who, as Vance Thompson says, were defiantly young and wore amaranthine waistcoats and flying scarves. *La Jeune Belgique* was launched; and Eekhoud had found his feet.

In 1884 *Les Kermesses* appeared, a collection of tales containing wonderfully vigorous descriptions of local customs observed at Cappellen and the neighbourhood. The language is violent, and often reads like translated Flemish; the realism is sometimes revolting; but several of the tales are masterpieces. In 1886 followed *Kees Doorik*, a curious kind of novel—it is rather a short story spun out by descriptions of festivals. It may be said at once that Eekhoud has never been able to write a consecutive novel: all his "novels" are made up of detachable episodes. Kees Doorik is a foundling who is hired (bought as a slave, according to the custom of the country, would be more correct) by a rich farmer near Antwerp. The farmer dies, and Kees, who by this time has grown up into a fine young fellow with all the

routine of the farm at his fingers' ends, falls in love with his master's young widow, and hopes to marry her. But she is seduced at a *kermesse* by a scapegrace from a neighbouring village, and Kees has to leave the farm where he has grown up and which he cannot help regarding as his own. There is forced symbolism in the exposition of his love for the fields he has tilled: *la campagne* has a double meaning, "country" and "wife," and the rather fanciful idea on which the gruesome tragedy is based is that Kees Doorik's love of the farmer's widow is a desertion, punishable with death, of his real wife, the country.

The last part of *Kees Doorik* is taken up by a description of the "goose-riders'" festival, a most villainous and brutal custom which shows that the Flemings of to-day are much what they were when the infante Cardinal Ferdinand of Spain wrote to his brother King Philip: "Certo que viven come bestias en esta parte" (They certainly live like beasts in these parts). A live goose is suspended on a kind of gallows, with its head hanging downwards, and the villagers

ride underneath it on their heavy cart-horses, each snatching at the bird's head till one of them wrenches it off. The one who performs the feat is then crowned "King of the goose-riders," and has the privilege of entertaining the unsuccessful competitors to a banquet and a great deal of drink. It is after such a festival that Kees comes into collision with the creature who has supplanted him in the affections of the farmer's wife. There is a fight, and Kees murders his rival. The description of the murder is a good sample of Eekhoud's violence, which we are asked to believe (and there is sufficient confirmation in the works of other Belgian authors —notably in Verhaeren's poem "Peasants") is justified by the fury of Flemish life:

"He plunged the knife into his body, drew it out, and plunged it in again. He had previously pulled down the fellow's clothes below the belt, so that there should be nothing in the way of the blade. At the first thrust the wretch shrieked: 'O Kees! Don't do that! Mercy! O Kees, Kees!' Kees took no notice. He was sitting astride of him, and had him completely in his power. He crushed George's hips between his thighs, as though he were riding a stallion. With one hand he held his

enemy fast by the throat, to keep him from crying out, and with the other he slashed away at him, as though he were hacking with a pick in the polder. His victim's groans died down. To silence him altogether, he thrust his knife, for the last time, into his neck, as you do when you slaughter a pig. . . ."

Les Milices de Saint-François (1886) is another tale of the Campine. *Les Nouvelles Kermesses* (1887) is quite different in style to *Les Kermesses.* These tales are in ordinary French, smooth and somewhat insipid, not at all in the rough and jolting language Eekhoud had hammered out for himself from Flemish rhythms. There is interior evidence that the stories are older in date than the first collection of *Kermesses.* The first story, for instance, reads like a close imitation of Conscience. Another story, "Bon pour le service," a poignant picture of military life in Belgium, is very interesting at the present time. Everyone who has lived in Belgium knows that the army is despised, and that to have to join the army is to lose caste.

"In all these vagabonds in uniform he found the same passive character. They all looked as if they had

been flung out of their orbit. In their eyes was the expression of a caged beast, far from its native clime. To whatever branch of the service they belonged, they were all sheep-like in their ways, awkward, humiliated, abashed. Instinctively they made way and yielded the causeway to the civilian. They wore, not the uniform of the soldier, but the livery of the pariah. Instead of representing an army, of breathing out the patriotism of a nation, of incarnating the best of the nation's blood and youth, they were conscious of playing the part of mercenaries. They were considered everywhere as refuse, as a burden, as people who don't work. When times were calm, these soldiers of a neutral country were apt to be confused with indigents kept by the public rates, with the inmates of workhouses and orphanages. This did not prevent the civilians from expecting that the conscripts would in case of strikes fire on their brothers of the mines and factories."

La Nouvelle Carthage is a very ambitious book. It aims at reproducing the whole life of Antwerp in recent times:

"To paint Antwerp, with its own life, its port, its river, its sailors, its dock-labourers, its plump women, its rosy children whom Rubens in olden times had thought plastic and appetising enough to fill his Paradises and Olympias, to paint this magnificent breed in its ways, its costume, its atmosphere, with scrupulous and fervent care of its special customs and morals, with-

out neglecting any of the correlations which accentuate and characterise it, to interpret the very soul of this city of Rubens with a sympathy bordering on assimilation."

Eekhoud laboured hard to carry out this crowded programme; and the result is a book full of interest, but not a novel. It is rather a collection of descriptive essays leavened by autobiography literally transcribed and fired by a fierce spirit of anarchism. The book begins after the funeral of Laurent Paridael's father, when the orphan is taken to live with his uncle, a retired officer in the Engineers (as Eekhoud's own uncle was), who is now a rich manufacturer. There is a Zolaesque description of the candle factory in a chapter which might be detached and issued as a socialist pamphlet. To Eekhoud the workmen are helots, and the employers heartless scamps. The machinery is diabolical, a monster always on the watch to seize and pulverise those who tend it. In the factory the toilers are slaves, and as soon as they are out of it they behave like beasts.

It is a curious kind of socialism, to take sides with the workman against the master, and then

make him out to be a swine. And with sympathy for his swinishness, one is afraid. There are, however, one or two examples of partly decent workpeople in the novel; but these characters are obviously spurious—they are imitations, no doubt, of types in Dickens, one of Eekhoud's favourite authors. Eekhoud could never have conceived a clean-limbed socialist like the chauffeur in Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan*. But Eekhoud is more of an anarchist than a socialist; and the whole doctrine of *La Nouvelle Carthage* tends, with regard both to morals and politics, to anarchism.

Antwerp is above all a great commercial city, and it was this aspect which was bound to take the foremost part in the novel. Here again Eekhoud is far from being entirely successful. He is too one-sided in his outlook on life. With his artist's eyes he sees the picturesqueness of the busy life on the quays; these dockers in all their dirt are for him types of masculine beauty (*beauté mâle* is an obsession with him); and he describes their activity with all the zest and glow of Homer describing a battle scene. But he has no comprehension of mercantile life as a whole. For the

sake of relief, perhaps, he introduces a pair or so of honest merchants; but it is quite evident that he looks upon merchants as a class with the bitter hate of a jaundiced anarchist. From such a standpoint it was quite impossible that he could create an adequate picture of a great commercial city: for this, idealism would be needed. There is more genius in Georges Eekhoud's little finger than in the whole body of Thomas Mann or Rudolf Herzog; yet these two German authors have succeeded admirably where Eekhoud has failed: Mann has transferred Lübeck with all its charm and old-world atmosphere to the pages of his *Buddenbrooks*, and Herzog in *Die Hanseaten* has given a fascinating picture of the strain and stress and the far-seeing aims of Hamburg merchants. Nothing could be more dull and unlikely than Eekhoud's description of a day on the Antwerp Exchange. He gives us detail added to detail; but they do not fuse—we only get a glimpse of the outward aspect of the Exchange. How much more vivid is Verhaeren's symbolistic vision of *The Exchange!* The poet gets at the *soul* of the thing! And yet even this chapter is redeemed by a fine ending:

all the retailing of routine leads up to the hammering of a dishonest merchant, and here Eekhoud is in his element—it is no longer a question of commercial life, there is physical violence to describe, and the narration becomes dramatic and animated.

The later chapters of *La Nouvelle Carthage* should be considered as a series of essays. The hero moves through them in a shadowy sort of way; but by this time all interest in this irritating anarchist has been lost. There is a magnificent description of emigrants arriving at Antwerp and embarking for America; those from the Campine with sprigs of heather in their caps, and with handfuls of Campine sand sewn into sacks, by way of scapulars. Absolutely unwarranted by the structure of the book, and yet perhaps the finest thing in it, is the chapter called "Le Rietdijk." The Rietdijk is (or was) a street in Antwerp containing such property as that which Mrs. Warren derived profit from in Brussels. Verhaeren has described such houses in his poem "L'Étal" (The Butcher's Stall).

Les Fusillés de Malines (1890) is hardly a

novel either. It is not even a historical novel, though it relates history with a novelist's imagination. It describes how the peasants of the Campine, when the Jacobins introduced conscription in 1798, rose in rebellion, marched on Malines, and took it by a lucky chance, only to be captured immediately by the French, and mowed down or shot as rebels. The scenes of slaughter are splendid ; but taken as a whole the book is rather thin.

Mes Communions is a collection of tales, most of them so weak that they may be juvenile work which has at last found a publisher. Some of them are swamped with maudlin sentiment which is not natural to Eekhoud and is clearly due to imitation of Conscience. Some of the stories, however, are sufficiently revolutionary in conception : "Burch Mitsu" has been reprinted as an anarchist tract, and some of the tales show that morbid palliation of sodomy which brands Eekhoud beyond redemption. It is significant that he takes as a motto for the book that passage from *Suspiria de Profundis* in which De Quincey confesses that the few individuals who had disgusted him were flourishing people of good repute, whereas he

recollected with pleasure and good-will all the rascals he had ever known.

Cycle Patibulaire (1892) is as robust as *Mes Communions* is weak. One of the tales it is composed of, "Hiep-Hioup," is a masterpiece of morbid psychology. A gamekeeper, who on the death of his elder brother had been recalled from the priests' seminary to take his father's post, and who retains the deferential manners of a priest, falls madly in love with a light-o'-love, and in the end he shoots her. The other tales of the volume relate such cases of carnal aberration. "Gentille" is the life-story of a farmer's daughter who falls in love with a noted smuggler on the Flemish coast, in the district about Coxyde, Lombaertzyde, and Furnes; she runs away to him and follows him about on the dunes like a faithful dog. The smuggler is caught and dies in prison; and the son the woman bears him grows up a hereditary blackguard. To her son she transfers the love she had felt for the father: it is not at all maternal love. The end is bestial: the wretch brings filthy little girls in from the slums and loves them in the presence of his mother, who is

jealous of his caresses. "Le Quadrille du Lancier" is a preliminary study for the bacchanalia of *Escal-Vigor*.

Eekhoud had to appear in the Belgian law-courts to answer for *Escal-Vigor* (1899). He was acquitted. It is not so much a palliation as a glorification of sodomy. The book is its own condemnation: the love-scenes with the boy are ridiculous in the extreme. The curious thing is that Eekhoud should have lent colour to the charge of depicting his own character by sending the hero to school in Switzerland and by endowing him with other personal qualities. Kehlmark, the hereditary "count of the dike" in some imaginary island off the west coast of Flanders, has, like Eekhoud, inherited the property of his grand-mother, and, like Eekhoud, he is an anarchist in his views of society. In this partial identification of himself with the hero of his book, however, Eekhoud probably does no more than show his withering contempt for public opinion, for, so far as information is available, he is an inoffensive man in his private life, and dowered with solid citizen virtues. Kehlmark has been taught by his

love of art to appreciate masculine beauty. On the island over which he has hereditary jurisdiction he takes a fancy for a young rascal who idles away his time sunning himself on the dunes, and has learned to play the bugle :

"Kehlmark watched the bugle-player, who was more robust and slender than the other boys, and had a complexion of amber, velvet eyes under long black lashes, a fleshy and very red mouth, nostrils dilated by a mysterious olfactory sensuality, and black, dense hair. The lines of his body were brought out by the wretched dress which adhered to his shape as the fur sticks to the elastic limbs of feline animals. His body, delicately poised and twitching to and fro, seemed to be following the undulations of the music and performing a very slow dance, like the shivering of aspens, in summer nights when the breeze is but the breathing of plants. The statuesque posture of this young rustic, who with the muscular *relief* of his mates combined a subtle perfection of outline, reminded Kehlmark exactly of Franz Hals's *Reed Player*. His heart felt oppressed, he held his breath, the prey of too great a fervour."

This passage may serve to explain and (to some extent) excuse the book. To begin with, no one will deny that it is an excellent piece of description. Then, it is evidently the transposition of a well-known picture. Belgian literature

is full of such transpositions. The example best known in England is Maeterlinck's *Massacre of the Innocents.* So that in such a book as *Escal-Vigor*, which cannot too strongly be condemned from the moral point of view, the correct standpoint of criticism is to regard the highly coloured prose as essentially a poetisation of pictures. Even where the picture cannot be identified, the art of the description has evidently been taught by painting or sculpture.

The culmination of the tragedy is appalling, and cannot even be hinted at. Recounted in words, the story of the vengeance of the women of the island is terrible indeed. But it would be hypocritical not to allow that Eekhoud by the resistless force and emotional fury of his description has gone far to justify his daring. If it is not morality, it is art. And after all, Eekhoud has only done in prose what Jordaens and Rubens and other artists did on canvas. This chapter of the pagan *kermesse* is a picture of bacchanalia, that is all; and as a picture, it is superb.

In *Les Libertins d'Anvers* something very much like sexual mania runs riot. Ostensibly, it

is a picturesque résumé of the history of Antwerp through the ages, with special reference to the sexual anarchists who at various periods have preached their "religion" and recruited a following. As a novel, it is absurd; as an *olla podrida* of history, anarchism, obscenity, and local colour it has a certain charm. The pictorial part is again most brilliant. The centrepiece of this succession of pictures is the Joyous Entry of Charles V into Antwep.

Other novels of Eekhoud are *La Faneuse d'Amour* and *L'Autre Vue*. He has written considerably on the Elizabethans; his *Au Siècle de Shakespeare* has done something to popularise Shakespeare studies in Belgium. That Eekhoud is not an exact scholar, however, is shown by the fact that he speaks of Ben Johnson. (Maeterlinck, another Belgian Shakespearean, talks of Ben Jhonson). He has translated Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* and Marlowe's *Edward II*; and he has written a tragedy of *Perkin Warbeck*, a fellow-Fleming in whom he celebrates the qualities of the race.

Eekhoud is a perplexing personality. He

attracts; he repels. He may be admired; he cannot be loved. He has the most energetic style of all Belgian writers; no one considers him a stylist. Appreciation of his descriptive powers is tempered by surprise at the clumsiness of his construction. He is overflowing with matter; and yet he repeats himself constantly—he seems to consider that what he has once written has permanent and incontrovertible value as a document, to which the reader may be referred for further information. To give one instance of this irritating habit: the passage quoted from *Les Nouvelles Kermesses*, relating the contempt felt in Belgium for soldiers, is reproduced in *La Nouvelle Carthage* —with some additional information it is true, as that in Antwerp girls refuse to dance with soldiers at the popular balls. Eekhoud's artistry is in description, not in construction. He is not a craftsman, he is a genius.

He is full of matter; but his matter has a great sameness. He is a rebel; and he can create rebels. Gentlefolks he cannot create, for he misjudges them. He has a fixed idea that the rogue and the vagabond is a free man, while the *bourgeois*

is hidebound in custom; and the elucidation of this idea is the main purpose of his best work. At first, the unexpectedness of the doctrine dazzles like a fine paradox; in the long run it palls. A great writer interprets life, which is infinite in variety; Eekhoud interprets a phase of life, the only phase he can see. But in his own limited range, in his championing of the outlaws of society and of Campine peasants, he is an acknowledged master.

It may be doubted whether his conception of the Campine peasant is strictly true to life; it is hardly likely that a whole race of agricultural labourers should be so violent and lustful as they are in Eekhoud's showing. The fact that all the characters he is in sympathy with are fleshy ("gars charnus," "plantureuses dirnes," "seins volumineux," "bras musclés," "hanches de taure"—such expressions recur *ad nauseam*) need not be charged against him; the men and woman in the paintings of Rubens and Jordaens are just as fleshy. It is Eekhoud's generalisation of character which provokes protest.

In his wonderful tales of vagabonds, criminals,

pariahs, soldiers, tramps, and beggars, Eekhoud can be compared only with Gorky. Probably Gorky's vagabonds are more true to life, for, after all, Eekhoud is an author who has specialised in such people—he is not and cannot be one of them. In other words, his conception of the unclassed is an artist's conception, one that he has dreamed himself into, and in which he believes passionately, but which is nevertheless a dream. He sees the picturesque exterior, rags and dirt and all; and in his anti-social fervour (which is an attitude, sincere no doubt, but still an attitude) he uses the vagabond as an object lesson.

On the whole, Georges Eekhoud must be considered as a man of genius who has lost control of his genius. He has not fulfilled the promise of *Les Kermesses* and *Kees Doorik*. He should have given us a stage of men, each distinct from the other; he should have schooled himself into a Shakespearean variety; but he has cloistered himself with the abnormal and the horrible, he has made himself the Belgian Webster, become a glittering and flattering mirror of violence and perversity.

CHAPTER V

ÉMILE VERHAEREN

Of all the men whom the war has forced into the forefront of public interest, there is none who deserves his accretion of fame more than Émile Verhaeren. But the war has not established, it has only widened, his reputation. Even in England, the last stronghold of intellectual apathy, he has been known to poetry-lovers for the last twenty years. He has been acclaimed in far-away Japan; one of his books (*Images Japonaises*) was published in Tokio in 1900. The one book of travel-pictures he has written (*España Negra*, translated by Dario de Regoyos, Barcelona, 1899) can to this day only be had in Spanish. In Russia he has been extensively translated, and he is in that country regarded as the great iconoclast of modern poetry who, more than Nietzsche, more than Maeterlinck, has opened the avenues of literature to the doctrines of power

and of the epic grandeur of everyday life. But the country in which he has had the greatest influence is Germany. The Germans, indeed, do not conceal the fact that they regard him as a German poet who by accident writes in French. He is a native of Flanders, and Flanders is German, for the Flemings are a German race; therefore Verhaeren is a German poet. They have translated him; they have written books about him; they have organised lecturing tours for him throughout the length and breadth of the German Empire, and everywhere given him 1000 marks a lecture; they have fêted, applauded, interpreted, and—annexed him. And when they came to Brussels, they paid him the supreme compliment of bringing his name with them on the black list of proposed hostages. They would have shown their further appreciation of his greatness by shooting him like a dog. Not finding him at Brussels, they are said to have destroyed his cottage near Mons, with its priceless documents and art treasures, the collections of a lifetime. However, Verhaeren is at this moment busy at a new book, *La Belgique Sanglante*

(Belgium's Agony), which is not likely to be welcome to his thousands of German admirers.

Nevertheless, the Germans are not altogether wrong in emphasizing the Germanic element in Verhaeren's work. None of the Flemish writers is more German and less French than he. In him the qualities of his race are sharply accentuated; and his very appearance (with his bony face and huge, drooping moustaches) is that of one of the Goths who sacked Rome. The racial characteristics of the Flemings are identical with those of the Germans; a certain heaviness in thought and expression, a marked lack of the sense of humour, an imperturbable and obstinate conceit. The prevailing characteristic in either case is that of violence—a violence of habit which runs to waste in the drunkenness and gluttony we see unashamedly pictured in Flemish genre-pictures, a violence of expression which in literature shapes itself according to the mind of the writer into a fibrous strength or a flabby coarseness. "The Flemings are brutal," Verhaeren will say in the emphasis of his conversation; and the merest acquaintance with Flemish life or literature

proves him to be right—the Flemings are brutal in the same degree as their near kinsmen the Prussians are cruel. We must expect, then, to find in Flemish literature what we find in Flemish painting—brutality and violence. This is not to be understood as unqualified censure—all expressions of praise or blame are relative, and from the point of view of a robust criticism violence in literature is merely a criterion of strength. Nietzsche's *blonde* beast *must* be violent; the superman *must* be violent. At all events, a great deal of recent German criticism has laboured this point; and it is not therefore surprising that the Germans should have pounced on Verhaeren and annexed him as a German superman, as one whose writings are full of German vigour, though the language in which he writes is the language of mental poison and physical degeneracy.

It is no secret that the *flamingants* look upon those Flemings who write in French as renegades, as traitors to the national cause. To many of their countrymen, therefore, Maeterlinck and Verhaeren are traitors. This is not the place to dilate upon the tragic strife between party and party in Belgium

—a strife which would be better called a class-war, a foolish class-war which may yet cause untold mischief even when the Germans are driven beyond the Rhine. But the existence and the savagery of this race-warfare must be recognised before one can get a clear idea of Belgian literature. It would be ridiculous in the extreme to regard Maeterlinck and Verhaeren as French writers; they are Flemish writers who write in French; and to understand them aright in their degree of importance as Belgian writers we must establish the fact that they are champions of French culture in a country where the Parliamentary majority and the paramount influence of the national Church were, consciously or unconsciously, paving the way for an alliance or a union with Germany.

If it were merely a question of literature, one might regret that all the Flemings do not write in Flemish. The Flemings are right in their battle-cry: "De taal is het volk" (The language is the nation, the language is the man). From the phonetician's point of view, language is the product of the organs of speech; from the point of

view of the historian of literature, language is the product of the blood and the heart and the mind. Just as individuals speak with the rhythms of their individuality—the violent man with violent emphasis, the gentle man with a gentle lisp or drawl—so nations mould their language into an expression of their national idiosyncrasies. The Danes, for instance, an æsthetic and indolent race, have swallowed nearly all their consonants and effeminised the virile old Norse tongue of their ancient sagas into a language of faintly breathed vowels, into a language without a backbone; the practical English have eliminated the superfluities of grammar to the same extent as the scientifically-minded and theorising Germans have kept theirs intact; the French have refined and clarified their language to the very measure of their own super-refinement and logical clearness of thought; and the Flemings (like the Germans) have preserved the clashing consonants and the uncouth gutturals, the resonant vowels and the voluminous verbs of their ancient Saxon speech, so that it is to this day a language that rings with the pristine vigour of broad-limbed and muscular men; a language

sated with violence, it is true, but with the violence of virility. When robust, vehement men, therefore, like Maeterlinck or Verhaeren, express themselves in delicate French they run the risk of losing a great part of their force.

When the ponderous thought of a Maeterlinck or the onrushing vehemence of a Verhaeren is confined in the delicate meshes of the French sentence it often seems as though the envelope were overweighted, as though the bag were bulging. Maeterlinck, at all events, reads noticeably better in an English or German translation than in the original, and the unctuous style of his essays, which seems as though some corpulent priest were being borne along in a sedan chair, bestowing blessings, as he passes, on kneeling crowds, would not have been possible in Flemish. But there is another feature of the Flemish character besides strength; this is, its inherent *chiaroscuro*, the half-lights of its mysticism, the colouring gloomed by shadow which is the secret of Rembrandt's pictures. Maeterlinck, who is pre-eminently a mystic, has finely illuminated this trait of Flemish in the preface to his translation

of Ruysbroeck; in Flemish, he says, "the words are really lamps behind the ideas, whereas in French the ideas have to light up the words." Maeterlinck and Verhaeren, then, have certainly lost strength and the fascination of the half-lights they might have had in their native language. Great as they are in French, they would have been still greater in Flemish. But at this period of history there is something far greater than national literature; there is the question of national life itself, and the service which such men as Maeterlinck and Verhaeren by writing in French have rendered to the cause of the national life of Belgium, which can only exist as a bulwark against Germany, has been inestimable.

As a matter of fact, Verhaeren himself never took the trouble to make himself master of Flemish. When he was a child, French was always spoken in the house, although his parents were Flemings; and he only learned Flemish when he went to the elementary school of his native village, St. Amand (on the Scheldt near Antwerp). He might, of course, if he had been a Flemish patriot in the meaning of the *flamingants*, have been at pains

to perfect himself in the language which was spoken around him; but, according to his own account, it would always have been a foreign language to him. And yet, according to authoritative French critics, his French has never been pure. His French, some of them seem to think, is a translated Flemish. To give one example, he finds it possible to write: *Les toujours mêmes jours*, meaning *les jours qui sont toujours les mêmes*. This phrase is certainly Germanic in structure; in German, for instance, it would be *die immer gleichen Tage*. But Verhaeren, in his conversation, will say that such ungrammatical expressions are not imitations of the Flemish idiom at all, but absolutely necessary to him in order to render the sudden impulse of his feeling: his distortions of grammar have been intentional; his Verhaerenese is as deliberate as Carlylese. *Les jours qui sont toujours les mêmes* is a circuitous phrase in comparison with the dramatic vigour of *les toujours mêmes jours*. French purists will never admit the right of a "barbarian" (Verhaeren has repeatedly been called a barbarian by French critics) to use an adverb as an adjective;

but he may possibly succeed in forcing his innovations on them in various instances of his word-coining. Here again he is as daring and as picturesque as Carlyle; and some of the words he has coined (we must remember that few French writers *dare* to coin words) have already been accepted: for instance, *les villes tentaculaires* (tentacular towns).

In *Les Tendresses Premières* Verhaeren has related the story of his boyhood at Saint-Amand. His father was a retired draper from Brussels. The house in which he was born (in 1855) was on the road from Termonde to Antwerp, and from the windows the ships could be seen passing along the river—"the massive and lethargic Scheldt"—that was always at the back of the boy's thoughts. It was an old-world house, with oak and mahogany furniture. From the windows of the attic Termonde was visible—Termonde, which seemed the end of the world. Behind the house was an orchard full of old pear-trees, which in springtime looked like a flock of white birds trailing their wings in the sun. And the great flower-garden!—Verhaeren's description

makes it seem a wonderful place, a garden with golden beeches and silver aspens, and with great cocks cut in the holly and yew of the hedges. Over the lawn roamed two Numidian cranes, and three crazy peacocks whose spread tails were like the sunset. To the poet-child the garden and the strange birds were a dream of Paradise, a burning fever of beauty as long as the summer lasted. His companions were the barefoot village urchins, with whom, in the autumn, he went robbing the orchards. And they went swimming in the hidden creeks of the Scheldt, where the grass grew as high as a wall, and after the swim they would dry themselves on the dike's velvet flanks. And little Verhaeren was on familiar terms with all the petty tradesmen of the place — the bellringer, the carpenter, the blacksmith, and the other artisans whose handicraft he was to magnify in the grandiose symbols of *Les Villages Illusoires*.

Near the house was his uncle's oilworks. The intention was that in due course Verhaeren should succeed his uncle. But, his schooling at Ghent completed, the young man showed no inclination to be an oil-manufacturer, and he was sent to Louvain

to study jurisprudence. In 1881 he passed his final, and set up as a barrister at Brussels. But Edmond Picard, for whom he worked as a *stagiaire*, saw that he would never make a lawyer and advised him to find something more congenial. As a matter of fact it was already clear to Verhaeren that he could be nothing but a man of letters; and after the publication of *Les Flamandes* (Flemish Women) in 1883 the way was clear. The book was hailed with abuse (one critic said the young poet had "burst like an abscess," and another called him the "Raphael of dirt"), but —it was hailed, and henceforth Verhaeren had a name.

Verhaeren himself has in his riper years more or less disowned this first book of his. He is wrong; and those critics of his are wrong who regard it as a mere collection of *juvenilia*. It has faults; but they are only the faults of unrestraint, and there is unrestraint in Verhaeren's ripest work. The poems are packed with vigour —in Verhaeren's own language they are gorged with sap, they are explosions of energy. The only question for the critic is whether they are

not too pictorial. But *Les Flamandes* is not more a succession of pictures than many another Flemish book which is praised as such. Verhaeren's idea at the time he wrote it was to produce in verse exactly such pictures as Teniers, Jordaens, and other Flemish artists had produced on canvas, in other words, genre pictures. Now in a picture gallery a picture is a picture; it need not necessarily suggest an idea. And anything that can be seen can be painted. As far as painted pictures are concerned, there is little restriction of subject. But, say the critics, if you write a word-picture, the picture must suggest an idea. And you cannot write word-pictures of anything you like: you must confine yourself to what is pleasant.

As for the first objection, there *is* an idea behind the pictures of the book, the idea that the Flemings of olden times were a much more robust race than the Flemings of our own days. Verhaeren was already unconsciously occupied by the idea of the superman; only, instead of placing the superman in the future, he found him in the past. The old Flemish artists were supermen, because they were such tremendous

eaters and drinkers, because they created masterpieces between two drinking-bouts. (The idea is naïve; but Verhaeren, it may be said at once, is essentially naïve.) Apart from the idea, however, the poems are rich with the very thing that makes a poem—with the something we have no word for and which the Germans call *Stimmung*. There is a mood of the greatest artistic refinement in some of the poems (*L'Abreuvoir*, for instance—a picture of cattle being watered at sunset), and even where the diction is coarse to the last limit of decency there is a brazen strength in the raw images which lifts the poem above vulgarity. Take the sonnet:

THE BAKING OF THE BREAD

The servants for the Sunday bake the bread,
Of the best milk and wheat; their brows bent low,
And elbows bared and at an angle, shed
The sweat with which they steam into the dough.

Yea, they are wet all over in their haste;
The sweat is running down their dangling breasts;
Their two huge fists are wading in the paste,
And moulding it in rounds like flesh of breasts.

The bakehouse heats its crimson flames outside ;
And from a plank's end, two by two, they slide
The soft, white loaves into their proper places.

But when the door is opened, like a pack
Of hot, red hounds, the flames force out a track,
And, roaring, leap to bite the wenches' faces.

Or that of the pigs running through the orchard close, and filling it with their grunting's hollow din, while their milky paps dangle in rows and trail along the grass; rooting in the midden and sniffing the simmering liquid that makes their skins "dither and glimmer like a crimson rose." . . . Such a sonnet as this may be called "unpleasant" by squeamish critics; but it might well be justified as a Flemish idyll—an idyll of pigs. And after all, these fleshy swine bathed in burning sunshine are not more provocative than some of the glaring canvases of Rubens—pigs or Greek goddesses, it is all a matter of flesh in the end.

There is not a trace of coarseness in *Les Moines* (1886). Here the exaltation is ascetic. After the "explosion of life" that *Les Flamandes* had been for Verhaeren, a reaction had come. Not exactly a religious reaction (the faith of his

fathers had gone for ever), but a return to the romance of the ritual, to the symbols of mystic fervour.

In *Les Moines* actual experiences of monastery life are drawn upon: the poet had spent three weeks in the monastery of Forges, near Chimay. He shared the life of the monks, and it was hoped in the monastery itself that he would remain. But all the evidence available shows that Verhaeren, having collected his stock of impressions, was very glad to get away to more substantial fare than the monks' table afforded; and there is further evidence that he made up for lost feasts by very copious eating. The result was a ruined digestion, which is perhaps the main cause of the appalling pessimism which blackens the pages of the next collections of his poems.

The German theorists have taken up the poet's legend here, and from the poems of his three books *Les Soirs* (1887), *Les Débâcles* (1888), and *Les Flambeaux Noirs* (1890), made out a case for what they call his "pathological period." He was evidently ill for a long time; but one may doubt whether the exasperated despair and the

pretence of madness which make the atmosphere of the books have more than a literary genuineness. The fact is that this kind of thing was the fashion at the time. One has only to read the reviews of those days to find a pessimism and maladies quite as excruciating as those of Verhaeren. A notorious example is Maeterlinck's *Serres Chaudes*, a most dismal display of dirges by a man who perhaps never felt ill in his life, but who had great business ability and the knack of supplying the demand. Georges Rodenbach was another sick man who popularised poetic disease. The Satanism of Giraud and Gilkin was another phase of the fashion. The truth is, Schopenhauer was in the air. . . . Some of the poets had actually read him. . . . It was the *fin-de-siècle*ism of which we have read so much. In the March-April number of *La Wallonie* in 1891 appeared a kind of prose-poem by Verhaeren, which contains the essence of all the "pathological" poems:

"I had arrived at such a susceptibility," runs the sketch, "that I would rush home like one demented, shut myself up in my room, thrust my fists into my

eyes and remain a long time in this posture, to drive more and more darkness into my eyeballs. I worked myself into sadnesses of ink, into rages of gimlets through a thousand metals; not only my eyes, but my ears, my sense of touch, of taste, my whole body, was torture to me: I felt acids under my tongue and thorns under my nails. . . .

"I did not dare to look at myself in the mirror. Was I not myself infected with that universal disease which exasperated me in others? My room, happily, was old and quite dislocated with departed memories, rather a thought than a thing to me. I only contemplated it through some dream or other dreamt in such and such a corner. . . . My room was thus a precious retreat, in which I cloistered myself for days together. . . .

"One evening, a song ascending from the deserted street, so desperately incoherent and void of sense that any dream-spider whatsoever might have woven its web in the threads of it, I had the curiosity to look out, all of a sudden. Fever was whipping my pulse; I felt myself burning, tell me, towards what madness? Below, under an oblique slash of gas, near a gas-lamp, a pale face, with a hole of blood for a mouth, was groaning up to me notes broken like its teeth. And in that face in the air I saw distinctly two holes on each side of the nose, two holes that had been stopped, as though hastily mended. The blind man stared without seeing me, with his head obstinately lifted towards the alms that might rain on him from the windows, a head lamentably stretched at the top of his neck, his head, oh! this

head of distress and misery as old as a century and beaten with wind and scraped with rain and as though of stone against death.

"Temptation suddenly scorched me with its red iron. I ran towards my dressing-table: 'This man, he at least no longer felt all the horror of his life, he saw it no longer, all the hideousness of his body, all the monstrous ugliness of the world.' And without reflecting, without the courage to do it, in an extreme fit of exasperation I seized my scissors and more immediately still, frantic, with I know not what pride in myself, I gouged my eyes out like two marbles in front of the mirror."

The extravagance of this nightmare is so obvious that there can be no question of taking it seriously as an indication of Verhaeren's physical and mental state at the time he wrote it. It has not the sincerity of certain prose poems inspired by opium. It is simply a flaunting display of "spleen," that very artificial condition of mental distress which the poets of the hour had distilled from a poem by Baudelaire. In the poems of Verhaeren's trilogy, however, there is a sustained coherence of the impression which lends an air of reality to the philosophical structure which critics have reared by taking a passage here and there.

Stefan Zweig's analysis of the poet's longing for death and approach to madness is itself a poem. The German critic rightly points out the leitmotiv of the trilogy: the will to suffer ("To suffer for oneself, alone, but voluntarily"). But this very insistence of the will betokens vigorous intellectual activity: here is none of the apathy of disease. The poet carefully notes all the phases of his exasperation, notes them with inspired imagery, in rhythms new to French poetry:

> "Mes jours toujours plus lourds s'en vont roulant leur
> cours."

He whips himself into an illusion of madness, watches the corpse of his reason floating down the Thames, and cries out: "When shall I have the atrocious joy of seeing madness attacking my brain nerve by nerve?"

"He has measured all the deeps of the spirit," Stefan Zweig interprets, "but all the words of religion and science, all the elixirs of life, have been powerless to save him from this torment. He knows all sensations, and there was no greatness in any of them; all have goaded him, none have exalted or raised him above himself. And now his heart yearns ardently for this

last sensation of all. He is tired of waiting for it, he will go out to meet it: 'I will go out to meet madness and its suns.' He hails madness as though it were a saint, as though it were his saviour; he forces himself 'to believe in madness as in a faith.' . . . Here the highest state of despair is reached; the black banner of death and the red one of madness are intertwined. With unprecedented logic Verhaeren, despairing of an interpretation of life, has exalted senselessness as the sense of the universe. But it is just in this complete inversion that victory lies. . . . It is just at the moment when the sick man cries out like one being crucified, 'I am he who is immensely lost,' that he is redeemed and delivered. Just this idea, 'to violate one's disease every hour, to curse it, and to love it,' is nothing else than the idea of his life, to master all resistance by a boundless love, 'to love fate in its very rage'; never to shun a thing, but to take everything and enhance it till it becomes creative, ecstatic pleasure; to welcome every suffering with fresh readiness."

It may well be that Verhaeren in this trilogy has created the classic epic of disease. This may still be true even if it should be proved by some future biographer that Verhaeren never had a pathological period except on paper. Certain it is that individual poems are magnificent in their metallic imagery, their raw colouring (as with

great dabs of red and black and gold), the daring onomatopœia of their rhymes. What a landscape this tortured visionary, this "sick wolf," unrolls!

"It can hardly be called a landscape of earth," says Zweig. "It is a grandiose landscape of dreams, horizons as though on some other planet, as though in one of those worlds which have cooled into moons, where the warmth of the earth has died out and an icy calm chills the vast far-seen spaces deserted of man. . . . Here all the colours of life are burnt out, not a star shines down from this steel-grey metallic sky; only a cruel, freezing moon glides across it from time to time like a sardonic smile. These are books of pallid nights, with the immense wings of clouds closing the sky, over a narrowed world, in which the hours cling to things like heavy and clammy chains. They are works filled with a glacial cold. 'It is freezing . . .' one poem begins, and this shuddering tone pierces like the howling of dogs ever and ever again over an illimitable plain. The sun is dead, dead are the flowers, the trees; the very marshes are frozen in these white midnights: 'And the heart is gripped by the fear of an immortal winter and of a great God of a sudden, glacial and splendid.'"

It is of particular interest to us in England that a great part of these three books was written in London, where Verhaeren spent some time in great loneliness, knowing no English, and collect-

ing impressions, not only for the trilogy of disease, but also for the greater trilogy of the tentacular city which was to come later. One of his favourite occupations in London is said to have been travelling to problematic destinations on the underground: this, no doubt, was as near as he could get to Hell.

In "Les Villes," one of the poems of *Les Flambeaux Noirs*, the poet, after describing London, exclaims: "Here is the City in gold of red alchemies, where thou canst melt thy mind in a new crucible."

This poem is a first expression of the new ideas which were to end his pessimistic phase. Verhaeren is by his very nature an optimist; it is a need of his nature to be able to believe and to worship with fervour. His break with the Roman Catholic faith caused him great suffering. There was another source of his malady. He had been brought up in the country, he had been reared on the open air. But when he settled in Brussels, the life of the city began to tell on him. He had to adapt his constitution to town life, and for a long time his constitution refused to be adapted. Then when

he fled from Belgium altogether to see the great cities of the world, he felt like a child astray in the wilderness. Even to-day there is something of an astonished child about Verhaeren. Everything is wonderful to him; these streets of London, for instance, through which we pass mechanically, are to him colossal manifestations of human power; motor-cars, shops, factories, canals, museums, the passing of crowds—"poured as from a bent full bottle's neck"—railway stations, docks, ships—what ordinary, meaningless words these are to us, and to him what storehouses of romance! But in the days of his illness he walked about among all this romance in absolute bewilderment. It was too immense for him to grasp the meaning of it.

It is perhaps not easy for the normal town-dweller to understand why Verhaeren should have fallen a prey to mental exasperation when he was plunged into the conditions of modern cities. And yet, if we were to think of it, what an awful thing a great city is! A modern city is something absolutely terrible! Probably most of us are awed and overwhelmed by Mont Blanc; but if dimensions are measured by terms of power, what a pigmy Mont

Blanc is! If we were suddenly transplanted to some pathless forest in Central Africa we should be bewildered, overwhelmed; but we walk through London without feeling in the least upset. Verhaeren, however, had to become conscious of the horror of great cities in order that he might interpret them to coming generations, in order that he might make others in their turn conscious of the magnitude and the sublimity of modern conditions.

For we have got to become conscious of them. We do not sufficiently realise that ideals are changing, that the epic of the past cannot be the epic of the future. We need not go as far as the Italian futurists who in their zeal for the future demand the utter destruction in men's memory of the past, who demand that the greasy leprous palaces of Venice shall be razed to the ground—we do not need to deny the past, but we do need to see that the pace of change is in our days so rapid that in one generation the face of the universe is transformed. Verhaeren's task has been to teach us to look at the change without fear, knowing that whatever mechanical inventions accelerate the pace of living the human organisation can adapt

itself infinitely, and that if the world changes, man will change too. All is well; because it cannot be otherwise.

But Verhaeren is first and foremost a poet, and one might think: it is well to be reconciled with mechanical inventions, to believe that "factories thundering in the unseizable rhythm of petrified exertion," workshops, motor-cars, and all these inexpressibly ugly things are necessary in the chain of human progress, but by all the teaching of the ancients and moderns, what is to become of poetry? Poetry is the expression of beauty; and therefore ugly things cannot be expressed in poetry. But modern inventions and the results of them are ugly, cries out the æsthete: they are impossible in poetry. For poetry we must go to the classical, the romantic, the idyllic past. The falseness of this attitude Verhaeren by his example proved. He too had turned to the past for the inspiration of his Flemish genre-scenes and the pathetic figures of his monks. But in the cosmopolitan searchings which followed he had learned to look at the world with different eyes. He had discovered new ideals of beauty. The beauty of a thing does not lie in

its outward form, but in the power it expresses. For Verhaeren, henceforth, the motive spring of poetry is energy. Poets had sought harmony; Verhaeren now seeks energy. To the old poets a roaring factory was repulsive, grotesque; to Verhaeren the panting in multiplied effort of the machinery has the rhythms of stupendous poetry. Viewed from this standpoint, all that had bewildered him in the modern City becomes intelligible, and inevitable in the progress of man to godhead; he sees that a modern poet must not only be reconciled with modern conditions but must discover their epic grandeur, and hail mechanical inventions as the poets of old hailed great victories. Following unconsciously in the track of Walt Whitman (his great forerunner whom he had not read), Verhaeren now turns his cosmic pain into cosmic joy, and strikes out into new paths of poetry which are destined to be the great highways of the verse to be.

The books in which Verhaeren sang his inspired vision of the new city are *Les Campagnes Hallucinées* (1893) and *Les Villes Tentaculaires* (1895). These are, probably, his most important,

as they are his most suggestive, books. *Les Campagnes Hallucinées*, "the hallucinated countryside," describes the desertion of the country for the town. The villagers can always at night see the glare of the city on the horizon, and Verhaeren personifies this City as an octopus stretching out its tentacles to drain the life's blood of the country. It is a magnificent and lurid vision.

"Cities have sprung up like mushrooms," says Stefan Zweig again. "Millions have conglomerated. But where have they come from? From what sources have these immense masses suddenly streamed into the mighty reservoirs? The answer is quick to come. The heart of the city is fed with the oozing blood of the country. The country is impoverished. As though they were hallucinated, the peasants migrate to where gold is minted, to the town that in the evenings flames across the horizon; to where alone riches lie, and power. They march away with their carts, to sell their last stick of furniture, their last rags; they march away with their children, to let them perish in the factories; they march away to dip their hands in this roaring river of gold. The fields are deserted. Only the fantastic figures of idiots stagger along lonely paths; the abandoned flour-mills are empty, and only turn when the wind smites against them. Fever rises from the marshes, where the water, no longer gathered into dikes, spreads putrefaction

and pestilence. Beggars drag themselves from door to door, with the country's barrenness reflected in their eyes; and to these last lingering cultivators come the emigration agents, and entice them to seek a far-distant hope."

The villages die. Everything streams to Oppidomagnum, as Verhaeren calls the great city. "All the roads lead to the town," he sings:

"This is the many-tentacled town,
This is the flaming octopus,
The ossuary of all of us.
At the country's end she waits,
Feeling towards the old estates.

"Meteoric gas-lamps line
Docks where tufted masts entwine;

. . . . .

A river of pitch and naphtha rolls
By wooden bridges, mortared moles;
And the raw whistles of the ships
Howl with fright in the fog that grips:
With a red signal light they peer
Towards the sea to which they steer.
Quays with clashing buffers groan;
Carts grate o'er the cobble-stone;
Bridges opening lift a vast

Gibbet till the ships have passed;
Letters of brass inscribe the world,
On roofs, and walls, and shop-fronts curled,
Face to face in battle massed.

"Wheels file and file, the drosky plies,
Trains are rolling, effort flies;
And like a prow becalmed, the glare
Of gilded stations here and there;
And, from their platforms, ramified
Rails beneath the city glide,
In tunnels and in craters, whence
They storm in network flashing thin
Out into hubbub, dust and din.

"This is the many-tentacled town.

"The street, with eddies tied like ropes
Around its squares, runs out and gropes
Along the city up and down,
And runs back far enlaced, and lined
With crowds inextricably twined,
Whose mad feet beat the flags beneath,
Whose eyes are filled with hate, whose teeth
Snatch at the time they cannot catch.

. . . . . .

Lust roars and leaps from breast to breast,
Whipped to a rage uproarious,
To a blind crush of limbs in quest
Of the pleasure of gold and phosphorus;

And in and out wan women fare,
With sexual symbols in their hair.
The atmosphere of reeking dun
At times recedes towards the sun,
As though a loud cry called to Peace
To bid the deafening noises cease ;
But all the City puffs and blows
With such a violent snort and flush,
That the dying seek in vain the hush
Of silence that eyes need to close.

" Such is the day—and when the eves
With ebony hammers carve the skies,
Over the plain the City heaves
Her shimmer of colossal lies ;
Her haunting, gilt desires arise ;
Her radiance to the stars is cast ;
She gathers her gas in golden sheaves ;
Her rails are highways flying fast
To the mirage of happiness
That strength and fortune seem to bless ;
Like a great army swell her walls ;
And all the smoke she still sends down
Reaches the field in radiant calls."

It is a terrifying vision, this of the City as a whole ; and in other poems Verhaeren paints pictures no less horrific of the various phases of the City's activity—the Exchange, the brothel, the

bazaar, the music hall, factories and workshops, machinery, labour. But, while showing us things as they are, the poet proclaims their necessity. The City, loathsome as some of its manifestations are, is necesssary; for the City is progress. The Country, with its idylls and its old-time peace and beauty, *must* die, or only exist at a slave's ransom, for it is the foe of progress. In herself the City concentrates energy, "red strength and new light," to inflame with fever and fecund fury the brains of those (heroes, scholars, artists, apostles, adventurers) who pierce the wall of mystery that glooms the world, discover new laws, and subdue the vast forces of life imprisoned in matter.

This—the necessary conquest of the Country by the City—is the main idea of Verhaeren's riper work. It proved a very fertile idea, and led, in a further series of famous books (*Les Visages de la Vie*, 1899; *Les Forces Tumultueuses*, 1902; *La Multiple Splendeur*, 1906; *Les Rythmes Souverains*, 1910; *Les Blés Mouvants*, 1912), to the development of various poetic themes—the beauty of mechanical things, the gospel of admiration, salvation by ecstasy, and other doctrines, all of which

have been patiently tabulated and pigeon-holed by Stefan Zweig (the authorised interpreter).

Les Villages Illusoires (1895) is a part of the series in so far as it symbolises, in some of its poems, Verhaeren's reconciliation with the world. But it is rather different in style to the other books —less inspired perhaps, but more restrained and more full of the matter of poetry as traditionally conceived. It is the only book of Verhaeren's in which he is a symbolist; but his symbols are so clear and broadly outlined that they need no interpretation. There is, for instance, the poem of the ferryman, who struggles manfully against the storm to reach the opposite bank whence he is pitifully hailed, only to find, when his oars are broken and his rudder is gone, that he is still where he started from. Beaten as he is, however, he has not let go of the green reed between his teeth. How inspiriting is this picture of will-power that clings to hope! More desolate in the murk of its landscape is the symbol of the fishermen hopelessly befogged in the night of ignorance and selfishness: the dank fog chokes everything and buries the moon:

"But flickering lanterns now and then
Light up and magnify the backs,
Bent obstinately in their smacks,
Of the old river fishermen,
Who all the time from last sunset,
For what night's fishing none can know,
Have cast their black and greedy net,
Where silent, evil waters flow.

. . . . .

And never helping one another,
Never brother hailing brother,
Never doing what they ought,
For himself each fisher's thought:
And the first draws his net, and seizes
All the fry of his poverty;
And the next drags up, as keen as he,
The empty bottoms of diseases;
Another opens out his net
To griefs that on the surface swim;
And another to his vessel's rim
Pulls up the flotsam of regret.

"The river churns, league after league,
Along the dikes, and runs away,
As it has done so many a day,
To the far horizon of fatigue;
Upon its banks skins of black clay
By night perspire a poison draught:
The fogs are fleeces far to waft,
And to men's houses journey they.

. . . . .

"Why in the dark do they not hail each other?
Why does a brother's voice console not brother?

"No, numb and haggard they remain,
With vaulted back and heavy brain,
With, by their side, their little light
Rigid in the river's night.
Like blocks of shadow there they are,
And never pierce their eyes afar
Beyond the acrid, spongy wet;
And they suspect not that above,
Luring them with a magnet's love,
Stars immense are shining yet."

Verhaeren is essentially a masculine poet, and women do not understand him. Many of his poems which deal with women and love are violently, outrageously erotic; but they are not love-poems. It was not till after his marriage that Verhaeren wrote love-poems; and from these (*Les Heures Claires*, 1896; *Les Heures d'Après-midi*, 1905; *Les Heures du Soir*, 1911) violence is excluded.

"These little pages," says Zweig, "are the privacy of his personal life, the confession of a passion which is great indeed, but veiled as it were with a delicate shame. . . . And in truth, it is impossible to imagine anything

more touching than the sight of this mighty fighter here lowering his resonant voice to the soft breathings of devotion. These verses are quite simple, spoken low, as though wild and too passionate words might imperil so noble a feeling, as though a strong man, a brutal man, who is afraid of hurting a delicate woman with a touch accustomed to bronze, should lay his hand on hers only softly, most cautiously."

They are poems of love sequestered:

"In the cottage where our peaceful love reposes,
With its dear old furniture in shady nooks,
Where never a prying witness on us looks,
Save through the casement panes the climbing roses,

"So sweet the days are, after olden trial,
So sweet with silence is the summer time,
I often stay the hour upon the chime
In the clock of oak-wood with the golden dial.

"And then the day, the night is so much ours,
That the hush of happiness around us starts
To hear the beating of our clinging hearts,
When on your face my kisses fall in showers."

Verhaeren is a lyrist pure and simple. Where-ever he has tried his hand at anything else than poems he has, comparatively speaking, failed. His

art criticism, especially his book on Rembrandt, is often interesting as a revelation of himself. His literary criticism is generous and all-embracing; he has no eyes for faults or littleness, but his complete intelligence of all literary genres inspires him with illuminating touches. His dramas have not conquered the stage, and they never will, though several of them have been performed with a fair measure of success. Even Arthur Symon's translation (*The Dawn*) could not make *Les Aubes* (1898) more than passably interesting, though it has some importance in the chain of Verhaeren's work as completing *Les Campagnes Hallucinées* and *Les Villes Tentaculaires* by showing the final reconciliation of the town and the country, after a siege of Oppidomagnum. At the present moment, too, *The Dawn* has points of interest in its prophecy of the ending of war by the triumph of socialism: only when war disappears, says the great tribune (apparently modelled on Verhaeren's friend and fellow-worker Émile Vandervelde) who is the hero of the tragedy, will all other injustices disappear too—the hate of the country for the city, of poverty for gold, of distress for power. Only

when races learn to embrace each other will the world cease to bristle with nations, armed and tragic and deadly, on the frontiers. *Le Cloître* (1900) has dramatic moments of some power, and it is a pity that the melodramatic acting during its recent production in London should have created a wrong impression. Miss Horniman's production in Manchester of Osman Edwards's rendering was a more genuine success, and was approved by the not easily satisfied critics of the *Manchester Guardian.* In *Philippe II* (1904) Verhaeren had (after De Coster) a great opportunity of contrasting the black asceticism of Spain with the rubicund joy in life of Flanders; he shows us Philip, a religious maniac, spying on his son, while he himself is spied upon by the monks of the Inquisition. *Hélène de Sparte* is fine in conception: he would show us Helen returned to Sparta with a heart sick of the love she has inspired and endured, longing to end her days in peace, "a woman who tends a hearth with slow and gentle hands"; but peace is denied her (for she is Beauty)—all hands stretch out to seize her, lust flames round her, and when she cries out for death the satyrs of the woods and

the nymphs of the rivers assail her, and Jupiter himself snatches her up to the sky.

Verhaeren is a world-poet; his theme is the cosmos. But for one part of his work at least his native province of Flanders claims him as her own and calls him her national poet. *Toute la Flandre* is a series of five books (*Les Tendresses Premières*, 1904; *La Guirlande des Dunes*, 1907; *Les Héros*, 1908; *Les Petites Villes à Pignons*, 1909; *Les Plaines*, 1912) in which he celebrates his native land in the present and in the past. *La Guirlande des Dunes* has now (like Lemonnier's *Le Petit Homme de Dieu*) an absorbing and pathetic interest. The dunes that in these poems are a "garland" are now soaked with blood; multitudinous cannon have thundered for months over these canals; and "this sad but sweet corner" is now a desert. One poem rolls out the saga of the immemorial towers of Nieuport and Lisweghe and Furnes, the towers that rise out of the sea-mists "like widows weeping in the winds of old winters." Wars with the rolling thunder of their guns raged round them, very long ago, and yet they stand. . . . They symbolise, these hoary, battle-stained towers,

the indestructible heroism of Flanders, the measureless mourning of her departed days, all the history of a tenacious land.

Great claims are made for Verhaeren by his admirers, and it is perhaps inevitable that he should run the risk of being over-estimated. In England at the present moment he is certainly read a great deal; and he is sure to become more famous during the next few years. The great danger is, not so much that he will be over-estimated, as that those parts of his work which have comparatively little value will be excessively lauded to the detriment of his vital poems. It may be questioned whether, as far as ideas are concerned, he has contributed anything indisputably original to that body of poetic material which passes into the public consciousness and becomes commonplace, except his great visualisation of the contest between the City and the Country. This one aspect of his work, however, is far-reaching, and it is continued in the chief revolutionary phases of contemporary poetry. From Verhaeren's spiritualisation of matter and his ecstatic hailing of the future proceed both the unanism of Jules Romains and

the extravagances of Marinetti. Verhaeren's influence is perhaps just beginning. Whether he will always be considered at his present value may be doubted. He has often, and rightly, been compared with Victor Hugo. He has Hugo's international fame; he has Hugo's rhetoric and sweeping gestures. Like Hugo, he is a spectacular poet, a poet whose words can be unrolled as banners and carried along by parties with a programme. But Victor Hugo, who was all this and perhaps more, has fallen into disrepute. His poetry was rhetoric, we are told. However, it has not yet been definitely fixed to what extent rhetoric may be allowed in poetry; and if the investigation were mathematically made it would probably be found that the greater part of the poetic masterpieces of the world consists of rhetoric. The likelihood is that when all deductions are made Verhaeren will remain; as Victor Hugo remains.

In one respect Verhaeren is vastly inferior to Victor Hugo: the range of his vocabulary is exceedingly narrow. His stock words recur with a frequency that is almost entertaining. But, after

all, words are of less importance than sensations, images, emotions; and in these Verhaeren is rich indeed. He is so much the richer in these essentials of poetry as his domain was practically undiscovered: he has been the first to mint the poetry of a new world. But even here we must be careful not to claim too much for him. The very fact that he was a discoverer implies that he is a stranger; he is not native-born in the new world, and there is always the feeling that he is not quite acclimatised. Critics have not sufficiently realised the fact that Verhaeren is so astonished by the beauty of action, of mechanical force, that he stands outside it. He sees it with the eyes of the spectator, of the painter. It has so much the greater effect on him as he has not the depth of a philosopher, but the naïveté of a wondering child. To him it is all a miracle. The mightier poet of the new world will have grown up in it, and will have eyes for manifestations which are less obvious.

CHAPTER VI

MAURICE MAETERLINCK

It is said that Madame Maeterlinck has a considerable library, all her own, which consists entirely of works written about her husband in all languages. Undoubtedly Maeterlinck has been one of the most discussed writers of modern times; and though of late years there has been a reaction against the over-estimation in which he was held for a period, he still remains one of the great forces of international literature. His books are translated, sometimes before they appear in French, into the chief languages of the world; and even when what he writes is feeble, it is discussed everywhere as though it were the pronouncement of an oracle. From the selling point of view, his position is impregnable. He has been attacked, by the venom of Jesuits, the innuendoes of the envious, and the sarcasm of critics who object on principle to literature that has a

popular appeal; but Maeterlinck sits secure behind his vast public, a mandarin rich and petted and spoiled. He is in some quarters the target of poisoned darts merely because, as one of his critics says, he is "glutted with glory and gold," as though this taunt of a too great fondness for the world's goods could not be hurled at nearly all Belgian men of letters, who are apt to be business men first and literary men after.

There is a modicum of truth in the belief that a writer whose genius is profoundly original is not likely to find an extensive public; but, on the other hand, permanent residence in Grub Street is not an essential criterion of literary merit, and there are several cases in our own times, beside Maeterlinck, of great writers who have amassed riches. In Belgian literary circles, it is true, there is a feeling that Maeterlinck has been unduly successful, while Lemonnier and Verhaeren, writers of at least equal value, have been condemned to comparative poverty. However, Maeterlinck may here be taken at his face value as a prince of letters in the sense that such and such a business

man (it may be for adventitious reasons) is known as a "merchant prince."

Maurice Maeterlinck, the son of a retired notary in easy circumstances, was born in Ghent in 1862. His schooldays at Sainte-Barbe were the most painful in his existence: he would not begin life again, he has said, at the price of another seven years at that Jesuit institution. Maeterlinck, however, had congenial schoolfellows in Charles van Lerberghe and Grégoire Le Roy; and the three clubbed together and subscribed to *La Jeune Belgique*, to which in 1883 Maeterlinck contributed his first poem to be printed. After Sainte-Barbe, Maeterlinck took his law degree at the university of his native city, but, having in those days neither voice nor presence, he soon gave up his attempts to practise. In 1886 he resided for seven months in Paris. He made the acquaintance of Mallarmé; and he courted Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. Of more immediate service to him were a group of young writers who were just about to launch *La Pléiade*. To this review Maeterlinck contributed *Le Massacre des Innocents*, the only short story of his which has been published. It

is an excellent piece of work, and the manner of it, if Maeterlinck had followed it up, might have led to a new realism, coarser in outline and more grotesque than the realism which Eugène Demolder was to develop by a similar method of transposing pictures.

On his return to Belgium Maeterlinck was introduced by Georges Rodenbach to the directors of *La Jeune Belgique*, to which he contributed several of the poems published in 1889 under the title of *Serres Chaudes* (Hothouses). *Serres Chaudes* is still a famous book, and to many people it represents one of the best collections of Belgian verse. That, however, is an impossible view; the little volume has historical significance in the history of the Symbolist movement, and it is interesting as marking a stage in Maeterlinck's career; but as poetry, weighing its intrinsic value, it is not to be mentioned in the same breath as any volume of Verhaeren's, Charles van Lerberghe's, Max Elskamp's, or Albert Giraud's. *Serres Chaudes* may justly be called "decadent": these are poems which consistently exploit a pretence of disease. Maeterlinck, so far as is known,

was as healthy a man as ever shouldered a rifle in the Garde Civique of Ghent; but during his stay in Paris he had seen in which direction the wind was blowing, and his mind was sufficiently adaptable to devise plausible lays of mental fever. Indeed, the poems have so authentic a ring that German theorists have inferred from them that he, like Verhaeren, must have passed through a period of mental crisis. In both cases, no doubt, there was business method in the madness. But a suspected insincerity need not detract from the genuineness of the poems: most poetry is feigning, and if the atmosphere is produced, biographical agreement can be dispensed with. And there is certainly an atmosphere in *Serres Chaudes*. Maeterlinck chose to regard the human soul as a lorn lily sweltering in a hothouse, amid the fauna of remorse and the slow palms of longing. The mood of listless apathy and sick brooding is finely rendered by chaotic but appropriate images:

> "O weariness blue in the breast!
> Wedding the better sight,
> In the weeping, wan moonlight,
> Of my blue dreams with languor oppressed!

"This weariness blue evermore,
Where through the deep windows green,
As in a hothouse are seen,
With moon and with glass covered o'er,

"The mighty forests undying
Whose nightly forgetfulness,
Like a dream motionless,
On the roses of passion is lying;

"Where rises a slow water-beam,
Mingling the moon and the sky
In a glaucous, eternal sigh,
Monotonous as a dream."

Other poems in *Serres Chaudes* are written in a species of drawling blank verse directly imitated from Walt Whitman's "barbarous yawp." They aim at creating a new kind of poetry by stringing successive images together. The effect is as a rule rather silly:

"O bell-glasses!
Plants from afar for ever sheltered!
While the wind outside is blowing my senses about!
All a valley of the soul for ever stirring not!
And the heat shut in at noon!
And images, glimpsed clinging to the glass!

"Raise none of them!
Some have been fixed above old rays of the moon.
Peer through their foliage:
There is a tramp, it may be, on the throne,
It seems that corsairs on the pond are waiting,
It seems that troglodytes are marching serried to the siege of cities.

"And some are covering olden snows.
And some are covering olden rains.
(Pity the sweating sultriness!)
I hear the swell of festive anthems on a famished Sunday,
There is an ambulance amid the harvest,
And the King's daughters all are straying in a season of lean fare through fields!

"But mostly look at those that dent the verge!
Carefully they are covering olden tempests.
Oh! Somewhere there must be a vast fleet on a marsh!
And I believe that swans have hatched out ravens!
(You hardly glimpse things through the moistness),
A virgin with hot water waters ferns,
A troop of little girls is watching in his cell the hermit,
My sisters slumber deep in a poisonous cave!

"Wait for the moon and the winter,
On these bell-glasses scattered over the ice!"

It is easy to laugh at such experiments as this. But if nothing was achieved, much was attempted. Maeterlinck's mind had considerable subtlety, and the very failures of his youthful dreaming are to this day rich in suggestiveness. We know what his intentions were in writing *Serres Chaudes*, for Charles van Lerberghe, the confidant and accomplice of his artistic schemes, revealed them in *La Wallonie* for July 1889.

"His verses with their violet tones," says van Lerberghe, "white with electricity, full of phosphorus and the wind of storm, opened out in our lovely evenings of festival a succession of new horizons, sinister and silent. . . . Here decadent sensations have reached the exasperation of their strength, the last burst blooms of their fever, and these poems of *Serres Chaudes* are the supreme black flowers of our day's overheated and diseased spirit. In the rays of this absolute radiance all is transformed. The air is hot and stifling. The dreamer pales, and his hands, moist with fever, palpitate; he is on the confines of a strange country of death and madness; his eyes are charged with a sulphuric light which discovers a world of mysteries. . . . The poet's rare magic makes you see and feel beyond sensations; he has the intuition of sensations; in sensations he discovers symbols, analogies, forebodings, sympathies, and antipathies hitherto unexplored. He pierces to the depth of things, sees joy in

grief, grief in joy, the supernatural in the natural, everywhere and always he finds horror, things unfinished and things exhausted, the danger of living, the difficulty of living. Instead of seizing the harmonies of things, he hearkens to their intimate discordance, to their *broken relations.* He renders the shadows that wrap every mirage and which are indeed its very essence and cause, and in the shadows he perceives the glittering of heavens invisible. . . . To render this vision by a material image, there seems to be, in the midst of a strange Dutch garden, the basin of a warm fountain, motionless and inert and suffering, flowered with the sublime nymphæaceæ of torpor: 'Et torpenti multa relinquitur miseria.' Here in a night of tempest nature is reflected. Things appear to emerge from the fountain's depths: they are only refracted rays, but their obstinate images in the end have poisoned the water, have troubled its essence, by mingling with it: symbols of their griefs, the light of their darkness. And this something above and beyond that we perceive at the heart of the images, in and around them, the mirror that shows more than it reflects, 'a glass which shows us many more'—this is the soul itself, warm, motionless and suffering. . . . The soul, like Saint Cecilia immured in her boiling bath, has said its prayer; it grows strangely pale, its eyes are in death, its hands are on the waters of madness, but the orchids of its crown shall not wither. They rejoice above it, a company of angels in the raptures and perfumes of the firmament.

"Maeterlinck is no chlorotic lover of pale roses and nightshades. His ideal is green rather. His style is

robust, bitter, harsh, without softness, without distinctions of shade; it blends a barbarian polychrome with the speckled dark of the styles of decadence. Most of his verses are formed of contrasts, of elements which both attract and repel each other. They are the positive and the negative poles of things. . . . Some of the poems have the heaviness of summer evenings; they are the warm rain; the sky rolling up its thunder; the odour of hot harvests. Others have the cold fluctuations of mercury, the phosphorescent skins of panthers, the poison of hemlock and belladonna, the elasticity of breasts moist and firm, the effervescence and the mephitic stagnation of pools. . . ."

There could be no better interpretation, not only of the dream of overcharged sensations which *Serres Chaudes* purports to be, but of Maeterlinck's early dramas, of Rodenbach's sick reveries, of Verhaeren's pathological trilogy, and of all the other phases of artistic perversion evolved by the Belgian poets of those days.[1]

Serres Chaudes as now published is augmented by *Quinze Chansons*, fifteen songs, some of them embedded in the dramas as well, which

[1] Pessimistic books were so numerous in the 'eighties that Célestin Demblon, in a review of Goffin's *Impressions et Sensations* (*La Wallonie*, Aug. 1888) called them "a new plague of Egypt," and foresaw the necessity of discovering an energetic insecticide.

have a languid distinction of their own. Veiled with mystery as they are, several of them, like the following, have the charm of folksongs:

> "And if he come back some day,
> What shall be said to him?—
> One for him waited, say,
> Until her eyes grew dim. . . .
>
> "And if again he spake,
> And did not know me more?—
> Like a sister answer make,
> He might be suffering sore. . . .
>
> "And if he would be told
> Where you are dwelling now?—
> Give him my ring of gold,
> And bend your silent brow. . . .
>
> "And if he miss the clock's tick,
> And see the dust on the floor?—
> Show him the lamp's burnt wick,
> Show him the open door. . . .
>
> "And if his last he saith,
> And ask how you fell asleep?—
> Tell him I smiled in death,
> For fear lest he should weep. . . ."

Serres Chaudes would have remained the possession of a few inquiring spirits if Maeterlinck had

not, on the 24th of August 1890, been skyrocketed into fame by Octave Mirbeau in one of the most astounding examples of puff on record. Mirbeau, in Mallarmé's study, had laid his hands on a copy of Maeterlinck's *La Princesse Maleine*, the first of the dramas, of which thirty copies had just been turned out by Maeterlinck himself, with the aid of a friend, on a hand-press. "What's this?" asked Mirbeau. "A masterpiece," Mallarmé answered; "you read it." Mirbeau read it, and ere long his eulogy appeared in *Figaro*, a newspaper to which Maeterlinck was destined to contribute many of his essays ere they were strung together to appear in book form. The critique runs as follows:

"I know nothing of M. Maurice Maeterlinck. I know not whence he is nor how he is. Whether he is old or young, rich or poor, I know not. I only know that no man is more unknown than he; and I know also that he has created a masterpiece, not a masterpiece labelled masterpiece in advance, such as our young masters publish every day, but an admirable and an eternal masterpiece, a masterpiece which is sufficient to immortalise a name, and to make all those who are a-hungered for the beautiful and the great rise up and

call this name blessèd; a masterpiece such as honest and tormented artists have sometimes, in their hours of enthusiasm, dreamed of writing, and such as up to the present not one of them has written. In short, M. Maurice Maeterlinck has given us the greatest work of genius of our time, and the most extraordinary and the most simple also, comparable—and—shall I dare to say it?—superior in beauty to whatever is most beautiful in Shakespeare. This work is called *La Princesse Maleine*. Are there in all the world twenty persons who know it? I doubt it."

Probably Max Nordau was as near the truth when he called the drama "a Shakespearean anthology for children or Patagonians"; but Mirbeau's praise, though injudicious, was sincere. It made Maeterlinck, who before long was being discussed in two hemispheres as "the Belgian Shakespeare." The label was of course absurd, but as an advertising medium it struck the eye. There are, it is true, points of similarity between *La Princesse Maleine* and several of Shakespeare's plays, especially with Hamlet, but they are merely external. Maeterlinck's play is boyish enough, but it is original both in conception and execution. Maeterlinck was already obsessed by the ideas which caused him to christen his early plays

"Little Dramas for Marionettes": human beings are puppets moved to and fro by Fate, the Showman behind the scenes. (Fitzgerald's Omar had put the matter in a stanza.) It is no use struggling against the Showman's manipulation. The puppets do not act, they are made to act. They themselves are hardly conscious of what they do: they move "like deaf somnambulists constantly being roused from a nightmare." The language Maeterlinck puts into their mouths (how far removed from Shakespeare's sonorous rhetoric!) is delicately adapted to this conception: they stammer short sentences, which hostile critics have compared with Ollendorfian dialogue. It would be unfair to take a passage at haphazard to afford an example of this marionette manner; but there can be no objection to detaching a scene which in itself is genuinely dramatic, the murder scene in the play:

Princess Maleine's room. The princess is sitting motionless on her bed, listening in terror: enter the King and Queen Anne. . . . The storm grows louder.

THE KING. Let us go away! I can hear her heart beating here!

ANNE. Proceed; . . . are you losing your wits?

THE KING. She is looking at us, oh! oh!

ANNE. Come, she is a little girl! . . . Good evening, Maleine. . . . Don't you hear me, Maleine! We have come to bid you good night. . . . Are you ill, Maleine? Don't you hear me? Maleine! Maleine!

[*Maleine makes a sign that she hears.*

THE KING. Ah!

ANNE. What a fright you give me! . . . Maleine! Maleine! Have you lost your voice?

MALEINE. Good . . . eve . . . ning! . . .

ANNE. Ah! So you are alive; . . . have you all you need? . . . I must take my cloak off. (*She lays her cloak on a piece of furniture, and approaches the bed.*) . . . Let me see. . . . Oh! this pillow is very hard. . . . Let me arrange your hair. . . .Why do you look at me like that, Maleine? Maleine? . . . Let me fondle you a little. . . . Where does it hurt you? You are shivering as though you were going to die. . . . Why, you are making the whole bed tremble! . . . I have only come to fondle you a little. . . . Don't look at me like that! You ought to be fondled at your age; I am going to be your poor mama. . . . Let me arrange your hair. . . . Come, lift your head up a little; I will tie your hair with this. . . . Lift your head a little. . . . So.

[*She passes a string round her neck.*

MALEINE (*jumping down from the bed*). Ah! What have you put round my neck?

ANNE. Nothing! Nothing! It's nothing! Don't scream!

MALEINE. Ah! Ah!

ANNE. Stop her! Stop her!

THE KING. What? What?

ANNE. She is going to scream! She is going to scream!

THE KING. I can't!

MALEINE. You are going to! . . . you are going to! . . .

ANNE (*seizing Maleine*). No! No!

MALEINE. Mother! Mother! Nurse! Nurse! Hjalmar! Hjalmar! Hjalmar!

ANNE (*to the King*). Where are you?

THE KING. Here! Here!

MALEINE (*following Anne upon her knees*). Wait! Wait a little! Anne! Madame! King! King! King! Hjalmar! . . . Not to-day! . . . No! No! Not now! . . .

ANNE. Are you going to follow me round the world on your knees? [*She pulls the string.*

MALEINE (*falling in the middle of the room*). Mother! . . . Oh! Oh! Oh! [*The King sits down.*

ANNE. She doesn't stir. It's all over. . . . Where are you! Help me! She is not dead. . . . You have sat down!

THE KING. Yes! Yes! Yes!

ANNE. Hold her feet; she is struggling. She is going to get up. . . .

THE KING. Which feet? Which feet? Where are they?

ANNE. There! There! There! Pull!

THE KING. I can't! I can't!

ANNE. Come, don't make her suffer needlessly!

[*Here the hail rattles suddenly against the windows.*

THE KING. Ah!

ANNE. What have you done?

THE KING. At the windows! . . . They are knocking at the windows!

ANNE. They are knocking at the windows?

THE KING. Yes! Yes! With millions of fingers! oh! millions of fingers! [*Another squall.*

ANNE. They are hailstones!

THE KING. Hailstones?

ANNE. Yes.

THE KING. Are they hailstones?

ANNE. Yes, I saw them. . . . Her eyes are glazing.

THE KING. I want to go away! I am going away! I am going away!

ANNE. What? What? Wait! Wait! She is dead. [*Here a gust of wind blows a window open violently and a vase containing a lily falls noisily down into the room.*

This passage will serve to show how naïvely Maeterlinck piles up the horror. *Princess Maleine* is thoroughly immature in its dependence on extraneous effect, but the half a dozen plays which follow are stripped clean of theatrical business and rely on a concentrated simplicity and naturalness of diction to bring out the anguish of a single tragic situation. Of *L'Intruse* (The Intruder), *Les Aveugles* (The Sightless), *Intérieur* (Interior),

and *La Mort de Tintagiles* (The Death of Tintagiles) it cannot be exaggeration to say that they are masterpieces for all time. Maeterlinck himself in his preface to his collected plays (*Théâtre*, 1901–02), defines his aims:

"In these plays faith is held in enormous powers, invisible and fatal. No one knows their intentions, but the spirit of the drama assumes they are malevolent, attentive to all our actions, hostile to smiles, to life, to peace, to happiness. Destinies which are innocent but involuntarily hostile are here joined, and parted to the ruin of all, under the saddened eyes of the wisest, who foresee the future, but can change nothing in the cruel and inflexible games which Love and Death practise among the living. And Love and Death and the other powers here exercise a sort of sly injustice, the penalties of which—for this injustice awards no compensation—are perhaps nothing but the whims of Fate. . . .

"This Unknown takes on, most frequently, the form of Death. The infinite presence of Death, gloomy, hypocritically active, fills all the interstices of the poem. To the problem of existence no reply is made except by the riddle of its annihilation."

In *The Intruder* the members of a family are in a room next to one in which the mother, who has just been confined, is lying. One of them is the blind grandfather. He is restless, irritable.

There are strange noises: all of them can be explained by natural causes, and yet, in the suspense of the hour, they are eerie. The sharpening of a scythe is heard outside; it must be the gardener about to mow the grass. The lamp burns badly. The house-dog crouches at the back of his kennel. The grandfather is sure someone has come in, and is sitting among them. Midnight strikes, and they seem to hear somebody hastily rising. In a few seconds the door of the adjoining chamber is opened, and the Sister of Charity appears on the threshold and makes the sign of the Cross to announce that her patient is dead.

In *The Sightless* the curtain rises on a group of blind people, six men and six women, who are sitting round an old priest. His face is as livid as wax; his lips are violet and half open; his eyes seem to be bleeding. The blind people talk, querulously, and we learn that the emaciated old priest is their guide, without whom they are helpless. He has brought them into the forest, because he wanted to see the island for the last time before the sunless winter set in. He has left them for a time, they think, and they are

impatiently waiting for him to return and take them home. He may have lost his way, they fear. It is night; they hear the wind raging in the tree-tops, and the sea thudding on the rocks. Now there is a noise of pattering feet in the dead leaves, and the asylum dog comes and lays its muzzle on the knees of one of the blind men. He feels that it is pulling him, and when he rises it leads him to the priest. He touches the priest's face, and knows that the guide is dead.

The symbolism of *The Sightless* is not hard to unravel. We are prisoners on a little island, where we can hear the mighty waters of the Ocean of Infinity roaring evermore. We had a guide—Religion—that still seems to be present among us, but is dead. . . . We are lost in the dense dark forest of enigmas. . . .

The inner meaning of *Les Sept Princesses* (The Seven Princesses) is as difficult to decipher as that of *The Sightless* is easy. In this drama Maeterlinck has taken his symbols, not from the problems of everyday life, but from the arcana of ascetic mysticism. Seven sisters are sleeping in a marble hall whose doors are locked. A Prince comes,

home returning from long exile, and through the thick window panes he gazes in rapt longing at the loveliest sister, who sleeps in the middle of the others, Ursula, whom he has loved since boyhood. He finds his way into the hall through an underground passage, past the tombs of the dead. Six princesses awaken, but not Ursula. She has died of her long waiting. . . . Maeterlinck may have had the idea of the Buddhists in his mind, according to which the soul consists of seven elements, the central one being Psyche, that is, the real self, the deepest and most essential part of our being, which is unknowable, which no earthly ideal can awaken from its slumber.

Pelléas et Mélisande, on the other hand, though like the other plays it is the dramatisation of a mystical idea, the idea that Fate drives his puppets, like a flock of sheep, over the mazy roads of Love to the bourne of Death, almost reaches human characterisation. It may still be said of the characters, as Mr. Yeats said of them, that they are "naked and pathetic shadows already half vapour, and sighing to one another upon the last abyss." But Love humanises even disembodied

spirits (what could be more human than the clinging together of Paola and Francesca in the Inferno?); and it is possible in this drama of Maeterlinck's to disregard the philosophic idea altogether, and read the story as another and equally poignant version of those famous tales in which a young wife wedded to a crabbed and ageing husband loves that husband's brother. "Hostile destinies are joined in innocence and parted to the ruin of all." But in the conception of Maeterlinck as a mystic there is no question of adultery in the loves of Pelleas and Melisanda: the soul is inviolately pure and cannot sin; and in harmony with the conception there is a childlike chastity in all the converse of the lovers. This remoteness from the flesh makes *Pelleas and Melisanda* unactable; and though it has been frequently played it shapes itself on the stage, fatally, as melodrama. It is excruciating to see it debased in this country even by some of the best actors we have: the symbolism is coarsened into absurdity, and the gentle words, as of souls feeling out to each other through the dark, are shouted and whined with the traditional accents and weighted with sensational vulgarity.

Attempts have been made to preserve the atmosphere of the dramas for marionettes by stretching a gauze curtain between the audience and the players; but it would need more than that to save such a scene as the following from outright murder. Pelleas surprises Melisanda combing her hair at the window of a tower:

PELLEAS. Come out of the shadow, Melisanda, so that I may see your hair undone.

[*Melisanda bends down from the window.*

PELLEAS. Oh! Melisanda! . . . oh! you are beautiful! . . . you are beautiful like that! . . . Bend down! Bend down! Let me come nearer to you. . . .

MELISANDA. I cannot come nearer. . . . I am bending down as far as I can. . . .

PELLEAS. I cannot climb higher. . . . Give me at least your hand this evening . . . before I go away. . . . I am going away to-morrow. . . .

MELISANDA. No, no, no. . . .

PELLEAS. Yes, yes; I am going away, I shall go away to-morrow. . . . Give me your hand, your little hand on my lips. . . .

MELISANDA. I will not give you my hand if you are going away. . . .

PELLEAS. Give it to me, give it to me. . . .

MELISANDA. You will not go away? . . . I see a rose in the dark. . . .

PELLEAS. Where? . . . I only see the branches of the willow overhanging the wall. . . .

MELISANDA. Lower down, lower down, in the garden; down there, in the dark green.

PELLEAS. It is not a rose. . . . I will go and see by and by, but give me your hand first; your hand first. . . .

MELISANDA. Here then, here then. . . . I cannot bend down farther. . . .

PELLEAS. My lips cannot reach your hand. . . .

MELISANDA. I cannot bend down farther. . . . I am near falling. . . . Oh! oh! My hair is going down the tower! . . .

[*Her hair overturns all of a sudden, while she is bending down, and floods Pelleas.*

PELLEAS. Oh! oh! what is this? . . . Your hair, your hair is coming down to me! . . . All your hair, Melisanda, all your hair has fallen from the tower! I am holding it in my hands, I am touching it with my lips. . . . I am holding it in my arms, I am winding it round my neck. . . . I shall not open my hands again this night. . . .

MELISANDA. Let me go! let me go! . . . You are going to make me fall! . . .

PELLEAS. No, no, no. . . . I have never seen hair like yours, Melisanda! . . . See, see; it comes from so high, and it floods me to the heart. . . . It is warm and gentle as though it were falling from the sky! . . . I cannot see the sky through your hair. . . . Look, look, my hands cannot hold it. . . . It is fleeing from me, it

is fleeing from me into the willow branches. . . . It is escaping from me on all sides. . . . It is trembling and stirring and palpitating in my hands like a golden bird; and it loves me, it loves me a thousand times more than you do!

MELISANDA. Let me go, let me go, somebody might come. . . .

PELLEAS. No, no, no; I will not set you free this night. . . . You are my prisoner for this night; all the night, all the night. . . .

MELISANDA. Pelleas! Pelleas! . . .

PELLEAS. You shall not go away any more. . . . I kiss all your body when I kiss your hair, and in the midst of its flames I suffer no longer. . . . Do you hear my kisses? . . . They rise along a thousand meshes of gold. . . .

MELISANDA. I hear steps. . . . Let me go! . . . It is Golaud! . . .

PELLEAS. Wait! Wait! . . . Your hair is caught in the branches. . . . Wait, wait! . . . It is dark. . . .

[*Enter Golaud.*

GOLAUD. What are you doing here?

PELLEAS. What am I doing here? . . . I . . .

GOLAUD. You are children. . . . Melisanda, do not bend down in that way from the window, you will fall. . . . Do you not know that it is very late? . . . It is near midnight. . . . Do not play like this in the dark. . . . You are children. . . . (*Laughing nervously.*) What children! . . . What children! . . .

[*Exit with Pelleas.*

Scenes of this nature, from which passion is banned and where only the stirrings of the soul, fathoms below consciousness, are suggested, are not dramatic in the accepted sense of the dramatic. Any other dramatist would have made the husband, Golaud, act violently; but the clash of words would be physical, and with the physical the dramas for marionettes are not concerned. It will escape no one that the picture of the girl with her long golden hair falling down the tower and into the branches of the willow is saturated with the atmosphere of the Pre-Raphaelites, and the same is obvious of many other pictures in the marionette dramas. This is not astonishing, for Maeterlinck had covered the walls of his study (a friend of his in those days tells me) with pictures from Walter Crane's books for children; and he had brought them nearer to his own dream by framing them under green-tinted glass. It is astonishing altogether what an influence Walter Crane and Kate Greenaway have had on the Belgian symbolists; to this very day the Belgian poets, if they are discussing British art, will speak first of these two artists. It would be easy to exaggerate the influence of

the Pre-Raphaelite poetry: so far as my own knowledge goes, only Maeterlinck, Charles van Lerberghe, Mockel, and André Fontainas knew English sufficiently well to be able to appreciate Rossetti's poetry. But some scholar should write a thesis on the influence of Walter Crane and Kate Greenaway, whose art needed no translation. . . .

Alladine et Palomides symbolises the idea that man is apt to dream himself into an unreal world. Happiness is a mirage. We seem, in our moments of enchanted delight, to be prisoned in a great blue vault ablaze with jewels and wreathed with roses; but let a ray of the pitiless light of truth shine in through the roof and the jewels lose their glitter and the roses are seen to be the phosphorescent stains of decaying rubbish. Far more successful in execution is *Interior*, a dramatic *tour de force* which dispenses with action and is somewhat in the nature of a peep-show interpreted by outsiders as the pantomime proceeds. It is probably the best thing that Maeterlinck has done: less charged with poetry and mystery than several of the other dramas, but more compact and poignant. From a garden we look into a lamp-lit room where a

family are sitting, resting in the peace of the evening. One of the daughters of the family has drowned herself, and an old man has come in advance of the corpse to break the news. From the garden we see him enter the house, and by the movements of the family we see the effect of his news.

The Death of Tintagiles is the most harrowing as it is the most eerie of Maeterlinck's dramas. In an old castle in a deep valley whelmed with shadow (the Valley of the Shadow of Death) dwells an old Queen. She has sent over the sea for Tintagiles, a little boy whose two sisters, who have always lived in the castle, guess that she intends to kill him. Even in sleep they hold him in their arms; and it is when they are asleep that the Queen's servants snatch the child from them. One of the sisters follows to the end of a corridor, which is closed by a massive iron door, on which in her desperation she smashes the lamp she carries and scratches the nails from her fingers. Behind the door she hears the boy crying that hands are at his throat; and then she hears the fall of a little body. We are in exile here in the Valley

of the Shadow of Death, the play suggests; we are at the mercy of a grim and silent force, against whose cruel will the most frenzied resistance is vain. We must trail our existence blindly, without daring to understand what happens.

The mysticism which inspired these dramas of Maeterlinck forms the weft of his collection of essays *Le Trésor des Humbles* (The Treasure of the Humble), which was published in 1896. The essays, if they do not carry conviction, have a dreamy charm and sometimes a wistful beauty. Maeterlinck, following Emerson, preaches the heroism of everyday life; unfolds his theories of active and passive silence—the latter is silence sleeping, the former is the language of the soul; and revives the doctrines of quietism to absolve the soul of man from the transient sins of the body. Such passages as the following would not seem so illogical as they do if they could be interpreted by a learned commentary locating the theory in the ecstatic reveries of the mystics proper—very remote dreamers such as Ruysbroeck, whose *Ornament of the Spirit's Marriage* Maeterlinck translated from the old Flemish:

"What would happen if our soul suddenly became visible and had to advance in the midst of her assembled sisters, despoiled of her veils, but charged with her most secret thoughts, and trailing behind her the most mysterious acts of her life that nothing could express? What would she blush for? What would she wish to hide? Would she, like a modest woman, cast the long mantle of her hair over the numberless sins of the flesh? She knew nothing of them, and these sins have never reached her. They were committed a thousand leagues away from her throne, and the soul of the Sodomite even would pass through the midst of the crowd without suspecting anything, and bearing in its eyes the transparent smile of a child. It had taken no part in the sin, it was pursuing its life on the side where light reigns, and it is this life alone that it will remember."

One of the essays deals with "interior beauty," and this doctrine is hunted to death in *Aglavaine et Selysette*, the first of Maeterlinck's plays into which the senses intrude, the first of his plays which, in spite of some lingering beauty in the character of Selysette, must be rejected as inclining to be meretricious. In this play and in most of those which follow the chief character is an emancipated female with a mouth full of very boring talk about "beauty," "wisdom," and "happiness." Maeterlinck has turned the corner; come out of

the dark into the sunshine, say some; left his ivory tower of poetry for the dusty mart of international commonplace, say others. At all events, his appeal is henceforth more popular; his artistry is less exclusive. *Aglavaine and Selysette* is a problem play: like Hauptmann's *Lonely Lives*, or (to go farther back) like Goethe's absurd *Stella*, it poses the question whether it should not be possible for a man to have two wives. Maeterlinck, or rather Aglavaine, sees a happy solution if the two women can manage to love each other as well as the man; in the present play, it is true, the plan does not prove feasible, although the two women are on billing and cooing terms, for Selysette, the good little wife, kills herself to make way for the emancipated monstrosity. It was disastrous for Maeterlinck's art that Selysette did not act as the wronged woman on the stage is entitled to do, for if she had poisoned or stabbed her rival perhaps Aglavaine would not have cropped up again as Ariane, as Monna Vanna, as Mary Magdalene. Nothing could demonstrate Maeterlinck's insufficiency as a dramatist (in the ordinary acceptation of the word) more than his utter failure,

as soon as he abandoned his symbolic puppets and attempted characters of flesh and blood, to create any other woman than this barrel-organ of wisdom.

It would appear that these rôles were created for Madame Georgette Leblanc, a French opera-singer who made her debut as an actress as Monna Vanna. To her Maeterlinck dedicated his second book of essays, *Sagesse et Destinée* (Wisdom and Destiny), which appeared in 1898. It is a chain of thoughts many of which contradict the substance of *The Treasure of the Humble.* Whereas the latter book had been concerned with the unconscious and the subconscious, *Wisdom and Destiny* deals mainly with the conscious. In *The Treasure of the Humble* the essayist had spoken of "the august, everyday life of a Hamlet . . . , who has the time to live because he does not act"; in *Wisdom and Destiny* we read of "the miserable blindness of Hamlet," who was responsible for the tragedy because of his failure to act. Action hinders life in the first book; in the second, action is accelerated thinking. "Life has no other object than death," we had been taught; now we hear

that life is more important than death, and that misfortune is less important than happiness. Happiness was what humanity was made for, and we ought to have doctors to cure misery, just as we have doctors to cure illness. One of the essays of *The Treasure of the Humble* had taught (in harmony with the dramas for marionettes) that all existence is subject to fate, and that there is no star of happiness, no destiny of joy. Now we hear that if predestination exists, it only exists in character, which can be modified.

There is a tendency among the higher critics to accept, condescendingly, *The Treasure of the Humble*, as an expression of philosophic lyrism, but to reject *Wisdom and Destiny* and the essays collected in later books, as an effeminate optimism quite as illogical as the mysticism of the earlier essays. Maeterlinck's optimism is certainly languid, and often unconvincing; and optimism should be invigorating and proof against the assaults of amateur argument. Nevertheless, *Wisdom and Destiny*, and all Maeterlinck's popular philosophy, has a distinct, if transient value. It sets up a

plausible code of conduct which can be partly followed even by people who do not want to make themselves ridiculous by posing as "sages." It fights deep-rooted prejudices. It is anti-ascetic —a morbid virtue may be more harmful than a healthy vice, it tells us. It makes for will-power: if we cannot divert events, we can at all events decide what form these events shall take within ourselves. We are the masters of our fate. . . .

In *Le Temple Enseveli* (The Buried Temple), *Le Double Jardin* (The Double Garden), *L'Intelligence des Fleurs* (Life and Flowers), this unctuous optimism (for all his hatred of the Jesuits Maeterlinck has never rid himself of their manner) is developed in the direction of a faith in the future which tallies with that of Verhaeren. The future is full of bounties which the genius of man shall bring to the light. The pivot of the world seemed to us of old to be formed of spiritual powers; to-day we know that it is made of purely material energies. We shall solve the riddle of existence by studying concrete things. We shall do as the flowers do, strain upwards from the dark soil to

a blossoming in the light. What religions call divine is the brain of man.

But in animals and flowers and plants we can trace the intelligence which is supreme in ourselves; and in *La Vie des Abeilles* (The Life of the Bee) Maeterlinck shows us what is most important in our own substance, that extraordinary matter of the brain which transfigures blind necessity, organises and multiplies life and makes it more beautiful, and checks the obstinate force of death. The bees are socialists, for in the hive the individual is nothing. The hive of to-day is perfect, though pitiless; it merges the individual in the republic. The bees have will-power, which subordinates everything to the future.

La Mort (Death) is probably the least satisfying of Maeterlinck's books of essays, though it procured him the honour (and the advertisement) of being placed on the Index. He shocked many people by pleading that doctors should have power and discretion to end a patient's life wherever hope was impossible, and others by proclaiming that if the punishment for not believing in the God of the Bible is eternal damnation, this is a far less

punishment than being compelled to endure the presence through eternity of such a tyrant.

Of Maeterlinck's plays other than those which have been discussed only *Monna Vanna* (1902) and *L'Oiseau Bleu* (1909) deserve study. *Joyzelle* (1903) is a tangle of absurdities; *Mary Magdalene* (1910) is even worse than Paul Heyse's play on the same subject, from which it unblushingly borrows.

Monna Vanna owes a great deal of its reputation in this country to the fact that its production is forbidden. The reason is apparently that in one scene the heroine is understood to be naked under her cloak, which the course of the action may compel her to cast off at any moment. Of course the Lord Chamberlain would know, if he read the play, that she does not go farther than making a movement to throw her cloak aside; but the audience might have to endure an unhealthy tension. Whether Maeterlinck calculated on this tension or not, is not clear; but the ascetic Maeterlinck of the first period would not have conceived the situation. The motive of the play, that a woman may nobly sacrifice her chastity to save a beleaguered city, is repulsive, but sufficiently

harmless in its presentation; and *Monna Vanna* must be condemned rather on the score of being tedious than of being obscene.

As to *The Blue Bird*, opinions differ strangely. To some it is a charming allegory, full of the deepest meaning and of truths forcefully conveyed even to simple minds; to others it is a hodge-podge of commonplace and obese complacency. It is at all events a palatable epitome of the doctrines elaborated by Maeterlinck in his essays, spun round the main theme that the blue bird of happiness, often sought in the distances of romance, is only to be found at home.

One should be chary of attaching too much importance to the attacks on Maeterlinck which are the fashion in certain places. It is not necessarily a hall-mark of mediocrity to have been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, although, it is true, there would be some grounds for the assertion. But neither must the reaction be ignored as transient, for there is point in many of the arguments by which the Maeterlinck of the second phase is assailed. The greatest blow was dealt by Louis Dumont-Wilden, in an essay which

appeared in *La Nouvelle Revue Française,* and is now reprinted in *L'Esprit Européen.* Literary glory, says this most pungent of Belgian critics (who, by the way, is like Maeterlinck himself a native of Ghent), is conferred by an élite of readers; but the élite has gradually escaped from Maeterlinck's seductive influence. The mysticism and pessimism of the earlier books had the fascination of rare poetry; but the optimism which so confidently pervades the later essays is a soothing syrup which is no food for men. Maeterlinck had for a time dreamed himself into the poetic atmosphere of the symbolists, but the formula of his art, distinguished and new as it was, only permitted him a restricted range of very simple and primitive feelings which were soon exhausted, and in the end the comfortable complacency of the Belgian middle classes drew him back into his native element. Now he settled down to grind out his "philosophy without tears" to a public whose dearest wish is to believe "that the first of all duties is to be happy." "Of course," continues Dumont-Wilden, "one must do justice to his ample rhetoric laden with images, and admit that it has

sometimes the cradling charm of a beautiful sermon. However, as the work proceeds, the design takes shape. All that is painful is avoided. Maeterlinck, very wise by this time, has become the moralist of the very wise. He is the charitable sage of ordinary days and ordinary people. To those who do not go to mass his books are what manuals of devotion are to the pious. He is the Doctor All's-for-the-Best of souls without piety. He satisfies that need of religion which survives the decadence of religions; by means of a vague idealism purged of faith he fabricates an ideal for positivists, offers a shadow of the divine to those who have resolved to dispense with the divine."

All this is not without plausibility; but it is evidently quite as easy to under-estimate Maeterlinck as to over-estimate him. The fact probably is that Maeterlinck—an ascetic, even if a calculating ascetic, by nature—has been unfortunate in the shaping of his life, and too submissive in temperament to preserve the originality which undoubtedly marks his work as far as *The Treasure of the Humble*. *Aglavaine and Selysette* was nothing less than a catastrophe. It ended him as a dramatist

in the running for a front place among the world's dramatists. To put the matter in a nutshell, his genius was killed by "happiness." His doom as an artist was sealed when he gave up dreaming in order to "live." Since then the world has been too much with him. . . .

CHAPTER VII

THE SYMBOLIST POETS

There is no distinction to be made between the Belgian symbolists and the French symbolists except that the Belgians, true to the doctrine of individualism which is one of the main tenets of the symbolist school, write poetry which is unmistakably Belgian. The poetry of the Belgian symbolists is the poetry of Belgian moods.

Of no Belgian poet is this more true than of Georges Rodenbach, although he was the only Belgian poet who has been accepted in Paris at his actual value. Born at Tournai in 1855, he was brought up at Bruges and Ghent, and took his doctor's degree in jurisprudence in the latter city. He practised for some time in Brussels, but left Belgium in 1887, and settled in Paris, where he died in 1898. A handsome man, a dandy, an æsthete, a *causeur*, he had become a favourite in Parisian drawing-rooms; he was an intimate friend

of Edmond de Goncourt and Stéphane Mallarmé; and his melancholy poetry, which kept the Parnassian form while creating a new atmosphere by a discreet symbolism, had a wide circle of admirers among those to whom the more uncompromising symbolist poets were stertorous barbarians.

But though he made himself at home in Paris, he remained a Fleming to the end; and his poetry is Flemish through and through. He is a Flemish mystic, quite as much as Maeterlinck was in his early years. He is haunted by Flemish images; his soul is ever dreaming in an old Flemish city where the stricken stone of the grey houses is mirrored in green canals lit by the white plumage of stately swans; he longs for the infinite silence of Bruges-la-Morte, the city that was buried in the tomb of her quays when the pulse of the sea was stayed in her and the arteries of her canals grew cold; he has lost his religious faith, but at heart he is still a worshipper in the old Catholic fanes whose steeples in their stone frocks project their shadow along the cobbled streets, in the city where from innumerable convents there breathes a cold scorn of the secret roses of the flesh, where

at every street corner, in shrines of glass or wood, stand statues of the Virgin clad in velvet cloaks. "Toute cité est un état d'âme," he says; and his own soul he identifies with Bruges. Above all, he finds a dream-peace in the béguinages, those sanctuaries within the sanctuary, those haunts of quiet in the quiet town, with their red-paved enclosures, where the priest, when the bell calls the béguines to evensong, seems like the Saviour in a garden of virgins.

With such an obsession as this, his books could not be other than morbid. It is poetry in a closed room, where the light only filters through muslin curtains; it is a music awed by the foreboding of death; it is a gallery of grey tints. It is all filled with that sickness of life which was an attitude of the symbolists; with the pessimism which fermented into a fever of hallucination in Maeterlinck and brought Verhaeren to the verge of (literary) madness. *Le Règne du Silence* (1891) and *Les Vies Encloses* (1896), the volumes in which the best of Rodenbach's poetry is contained, must ever be monuments of Belgian art by the side of *Serres Chaudes* and the three volumes of Verhaeren's

pathological period, even though the cult of virility and optimism, which has in our days overcome that *fin-de-siècle* despondency of the symbolists, refuses to be spellbound by the subtle imagery and trailing rhythms of this poet of yesteryear. What fascination there is in Rodenbach's lethargic reveries may be gathered from this one poem :

"You are my sisters, souls that dwell apart,
In dreams half dreamt in listlessness of heart,
Cloistered in towns whose glories have grown pale,
Old towns that drowse along their rivers frail ;
O souls whose silence is a worshipping ;
Souls pierced by noise ; who love no other thing
Save that which might have been and shall not be ;
Fed with the Host and Holy Chrism are ye,
Mystics whose sad youth dreamed of sailing hence
To some far city, fabulous, immense,
But now dream only with these waters wan,
These waters slow that silence swoons upon. . . .

. . . . . .

And round you rolls itself the angelus,
As round a spinning-wheel the soft wool does !

. . . . . .

Sisters of mine more than of any other,
Sisters of mine are you in Silence, our Mother !"

Rodenbach sings only of depressing things. He yields to his depression in the same measure

as Verhaeren resists his. Characteristic of each poet are the verses they have dedicated to the rain. In Verhaeren's vision the rain is a force sinister but wild with energy:

"The water drips hour after hour,
The spouts gush, and the trees shower. . . .

. . . . . .

Rivers o'er rotten dikes are brimming
Upon the meadows where drowned hay is swimming;
The wind is whipping walnut trees and alders,
And big black oxen wading stand
Deep in the water of the polders,
And bellow at the writhen sky. . . ."

Rodenbach's vision is weary and anæmic:

"O the rain! O the rain! O the slow water thread,
Which Time unwinds from his black spindles still,
As though the years had kept their tears to shed,
While on young autumn leans the evening, sick and ill!
O the rain! O the slow skeins of the water thread!

"Who shall say the sombre mourning of the firmament?
Cemetery road where like dirge verses
Murk clouds move somnolent,
Corpses of stars jumbled along in hearses,
Who shall say the sombre mourning of the firmament?

"On dark and empty streets of mourning the rain drips,
Dripping for ever through our chill remorse,
Like tears for dead things ever on our lips,
Like tears falling from the closed eye of a corse,
On dark and empty streets of mourning the rain drips.

"The rain is over our old dreams a net,
And in its water meshes prisoner takes
Their wings, until these songsters die of fret,
Of longing for the light, of lingering aches,
The rain is over our old dreams a net.

"Like a wet flag drooping against its pole,
With griefs awakening that have long been quenched,
The dark rain penetrates and soaks our soul,
Until it is a rag discoloured, drenched,
Like a wet rag drooping against its pole."

This last image, of a soul like a wet rag, is sufficiently curious; and Rodenbach's work teems with such ideas, which as a rule, however, are rendered tolerable by the general mood of the poem. To say, for instance, that the moon in the clouds is like a bosom peering forth from white linen seems to be as extravagant as that jocular comparison of one of Mr. Wells's heroines who, when she first donned evening dress, felt like a ham

in its frill; but in his poem "The Milky Moon" Rodenbach makes the idea plausible enough:

> "The moon is showing, in the sky of night,
> A chaste bosom, as a nurse might do,
> To feed the caprice of those dreamers who
> Love to be drinking in its milky light.
>
> "Enough to nourish me, who also lie
> And sleep by night upon this ample breast
> Of recommencements ruined and distressed. . . .
> And like fresh linen round it is the sky."

Rodenbach's best poems are those in which he can take his images from the architecture and the specific atmosphere of Flemish towns, as in this of "Belfry Petals":

> "In the languorous morning of a country town
> The belfry chimes, chimes with the tender dyes
> Of the dawn looking with a sister's eyes,
> The belfry chimes, and on the roofs throws down
> Its pale, diaphanous music flower by flower,
> Crumbling them on black gables like handfuls
> Of dewy sounds the wind sweeps up and culls,
> Music of morning falling from the tower,
> Like faded wreaths far falling wet with tears,
> Invisible lilies falling from the yore,
> In such slow petals, petals pale and frore,
> They seem shed on the dead brow of the years."

Or in "Old Bells":

"Bells I have known that noiseless went their way,
Poor bells that lived in little sordid turrets,
And seemed to be lamenting that their spirits
Could never be at rest by night or day.

"Bells of a suburb, coughing, broken down;
Old women visiting at evening's hour
Each other, you had said, from tower to tower,
Tottering along in their worn-out bronze gown."

Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* is a famous novel. Everybody who visits Bruges is supposed to have it with him, in order to read himself into the *Stimmung* of the town. The book does indeed suggest an atmosphere, but only by violent images, too vivid and rare for prose. Thus, slander in dead cities grows like the grass among the cobble-stones; all day long the belfry bells swing their black unseen censers, whence a smoke of sound unrolls; the church organ spreads out a dark velvet; the gables of the houses are in the shape of crosses; the wind is filled with bells; the shadow of the church towers is too heavy; the hero goes to the hospital of St. John to bathe his feverish

retina in its white walls; the gardens in the court-yards of the hospital are padded with box. These images (some of them absurd in translation, but not unnatural in the setting of the original) are varied with a true poet's skill; they change as the moods change.

As to the theme of the novel, it is negligible. It is for the sake of the poetry that the book is read. Nay, the theme is more than negligible, it is ridiculous. Hugues has lost his wife, whom he loved passionately. While she was lying dead he had cut off the long plaits of her hair; and, settling with his mourning in Bruges, he keeps the hair in a glass case. After five years he meets a woman in the streets who seems to him the very image of his dead wife. He accosts her; and soon she is his mistress. But—if she has the body, she has not the soul of his dead wife. He denies her admittance to the house where he keeps the plait of hair; but at last she finds a pretext to inspect the mysterious rooms, sees the hair, lifts the glass case, and brandishes the plait aloft. To Hugues it seems a sacrilege that this vulgar actress should touch the relic of his dead saint;

and—he strangles her with the tresses she has profaned.

The scene of another novel of Rodenbach's, *Le Carillonneur*, is likewise in Bruges. The hero, Joris Borluut, is an architect, whose life is devoted to restoring the crumbling masonry of the city. In his love of its far-famed chimes he also acts as a bellringer. His wife's sister is in love with him, and one day she yields to her passion when under the influence of religious suggestion. The rest of the book describes her repentance, and that of Borluut.

There was for some years a cult of Rodenbach. It was followed by the inevitable reaction; and some of us in recent years have been told not to read him at all. His best friends have not been loyal to his memory; they have allowed him to fall into neglect without protest. He is one of those poets who lend themselves to cheap criticism; he wrote a great deal of poor stuff, as all pampered poets do; but he has written a certain number of flawless poems; he has created a legend, the legend of "the dead city," of an ideal Flanders dying in devout prayer; and he (great

talker as he was) devised before Maeterlinck a ritual of silence which is ever a quiet refuge for hearts sick of what sometimes seems the blatant, dusty optimism of the present fashion. Some day, when people are sick of violence, there will be a Rodenbach revival.

Georges Rodenbach, as everybody knows, was Verhaeren's schoolfellow at the College of Sainte-Barbe in Ghent. A few years later three other future poets were schoolfellows in the same unwilling nursery of Belgian verse. These were Maurice Maeterlinck, Charles van Lerberghe, and Grégoire Le Roy.

Charles van Lerberghe will perhaps never be appreciated as he should be in English-speaking lands. He is a poets' poet. . . . While we are lauding Maeterlinck and Verhaeren to the skies, the other Belgian poets smile. Ask a Belgian writer who is the greatest poet of his nation, and the answer is pretty sure to be: Charles van Lerberghe.

Of course, it is rather foolish to fix the values of poets in superlatives. So much would depend, for instance, on what one means by "poet." Ver-

haeren, no doubt, is a greater *writer* than van Lerberghe—he has a vaster sweep, he is nearer the beating heart of the present, he appeals to multitudes, whereas van Lerberghe is the poet of a few. The great mass of Verhaeren's poetry is rhetoric; in Charles van Lerberghe, on the other hand, there is not a trace of rhetoric. Van Lerberghe's lyrics cannot be recited, they can only be sung. Victor Hugo and Verhaeren are immense poets; Verlaine and van Lerberghe are intense poets. . . It is the eternal rivalry between the popular poet and the divine poet, between Byron and Shelley.

Charles van Lerberghe was born in Ghent in 1861. His parents died while he was quite a boy, and Maeterlinck's uncle then acted as his guardian. He first attracted attention by the verses he contributed to *La Pléiade* in 1886; and the most fascinating poems in *Le Parnasse de la Jeune Belgique* are his. In Paris he became known when, in 1892, his little play "for marionettes," *Les Flaireurs*, was acted at the Théâtre d'Art. It had appeared in *La Wallonie* for 1889, just a year before Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse* appeared in

the same review. The two dramas have much in common: the dialogue is vaguely similar, though much more rapid and energetic in van Lerberghe's play; and the main idea, the coming of Death to a sick person, is the same in both. Charges of plagiarism have been made against both writers, but particularly against Maeterlinck, who according to the innuendoes of some writers derived all that makes his originality from his bosom friend. The truth is known only to Maeterlinck himself and to Albert Mockel, the custodian of van Lerberghe's memoirs. The truth no doubt is that the two friends discussed the idea, and treated it by common accord each in his own way. As a matter of fact, Maeterlinck helped van Lerberghe in the composition of his play: one of the most vivid touches—the stage direction: "The blind is raised, the window is lit up, and the shadow of the hearse is projected on the wall"—is by Maeterlinck.

Van Lerberghe was a desultory student, but his mind was very scholarly. He had periods of intense and chambered study, and, apart from his university degree of Doctor of Philosophy, ac-

quired at Brussels, his reading of the ancients had made him a good classic. (Most of the Belgian writers are hardly scholars in the English sense, though practically every one of them has all the history of art at his fingers' ends.) In 1898 appeared his first volume of verse, *Entrevisions*, which at once placed him in the front rank of contemporary lyrists. They are lyrics which by a selection of titles suggest the atmosphere of the *Song of Songs*. But they are more than love-songs. In *Entrevisions* Love himself is prisoned in music. It is all a music of suggestion; nothing is clearly expressed. The images are sensuous; but the feeling they awaken is not sensuous. Love is etherealised; the body is a shadow; here soul calls to soul.

After the publication of *Entrevisions* van Lerberghe travelled considerably. He stayed in London, and there, probably, he read Rossetti, whose influence on his work is discernible. But the chief formative influence in his mature work is that of his stay in Italy. On his way there he made a halt in Berlin, where Stefan George took him about. Some of the letters he wrote on this

tour have been published;[1] they are exceedingly interesting, full of malice and very much to the point, not in the least nebulous, as from his poetry one would have expected them to be. Here is an impression of Berlin:

"I rather like Berlin. It is what they call in German *eine grosse Stadt;* freely translated, a gross town. The monuments are pompous, classical, imperial; the streets are symmetrical, populous, interminable, stupid, but amusing. The famous 'Under den Linden' is a vast boulevard where I did in fact notice various trees. This morning I saw something fine: soldiers returning from the Kaiser's palace, but what soldiers! Giants (at least they seemed so in the fog) wrapped in long cloaks, and with metal helmets surmounted by eagles with spread wings. They were carrying white banners with golden eagles, which were crowned, I don't know why, with laurel leaves. A scene from the middle ages. And this is the twentieth century. But all that relates to the army here has a real greatness. They have put a lot of their genius into that."

In Rome, where he stayed seven months, he worked at his new volume of verse, *La Chanson d'Ève* (The Song of Eve), and his comedy *Pan.* Albert Mockel joined him, and they went to-

[1] *La Vie Intellectuelle*, Jan., Feb., March 1913.

gether to Florence, where, in the beautiful surroundings of an old manor where Galileo once lived, *La Chanson d'Ève* made progress. One of van Lerberghe's letters throws light on the composition of his masterpiece:

"All my poems, as Maeterlinck and other people have said, are pictures. My *Song of Eve* is just as much painted as it is sung, so they say, and they are quite right. I used to spend hours in the morning, hours of ecstatic adoration, before paintings like Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* or Leonardi's *Annunciation*, and then I would return to my Eve's garden at the Torre del Gallo with my eyes dazzled."

On his return to Belgium he obtained an appointment under the Government as an *attaché* at the Musée du Cinquantenaire, with the magnificent salary of 1200 francs per annum! He very soon scandalised his family by relinquishing this position.

The *Mercure de France* treated him generously enough when, on the publication of *La Chanson d'Ève* in 1904, they gave him 500 francs for the first edition; but evidently he could not hope to live by literature. *Pan* was acted at the Théâtre

de l'Œuvre and published by the *Mercure* in 1906, and the comedy attracted attention at home and abroad; but in September of the same year van Lerberghe was struck down by the mental illness which ended in a tragically early death a year later. His family were mainly concerned with saving his soul, which, as they thought, had been lost by the blasphemies of *Pan*, and according to their account he was "converted" on his deathbed.

Some day, it is to be hoped, a detailed biography of van Lerberghe, together with his correspondence and memoirs, will be issued. (His delightful *Contes*, too, of which several have appeared in *Vers et Prose* and other journals, need collecting.) None of the Belgians is more interesting as a man. He was not at all the angel, the ethereal dreamer one would imagine him to be from his poems.

He was a grown man, not at all an eternal cherub; he was big of bone, with the frame of an athletic Englishman, a great eater and drinker, and (apparently) a great lover. Those who have read his verse and imagined their own picture of

him are bound to be shocked when they first see his portrait. He had the appearance of a big, awkward farmer; and he had a habit of blushing when spoken to.

La Chanson d'Ève is the purest work of poetry in Belgian literature. There is not a line which could be rendered in verse; there is not a stanza which could even approximately be translated into any language. The poem must be taken as it is, with its incomparably musical rhythms, its visions of white limbs emerging for a moment from the morning mists in an enchanted garden, its delicate suggestions of the rapture and sadness of human life as determined by the awakening and the blossoming and the withering of love. It is the song of Eve, because Eve was woman, and woman is the flower of Paradise, the fate of man. "It is the divine youth of the first woman," says Albert Mockel in his masterly critique, "but it is at the same time the eternal legend of the maiden who awakens from innocence to love, to the intoxication of understanding and the sadness of knowledge." We have at the commencement Eve awakening in the Garden of Eden to the things around her,

with which she is one: she is the sun that dazzles her eyes, she is the flowers she breathes, and she does not know where she ends and where she begins. She is the angel spirit come to a bewildering earth from where she knows not, and we do not see her in the full light of day—she is a voice sweetly singing the mysteries of existence; we do not see Eve, we see her shadow:

"In a perfume of white roses
She sits, dream-fast;
And the shadow is beautiful as though an angel there
were glassed.

"The gloam descends, the grove reposes;
The leaves and branches through,
On the gold Paradise is opening one of blue.

"A last faint wave breaks on the darkening shore.
A voice that sang just now is murmuring.
A murmuring breath is breathing . . . now no more.

"In the silence petals fall. . . ."

"Eve is everywhere present," says Jean Dominique,[1] "radiant, innocent, and beautiful. Angels guide her feet, and they are so eager to guard her from ill that their encircling wings meet round her shoulders. She speaks, and her voice, like that of princesses in fairy tales, breathes

[1] *Le Thyrse*, March 1913.

roses; and her laughter rings out in radiance. She kisses the ashes on a bed of leaves, and her scented breath kindles the flame again. . . . Then Eve meets the bird of Desire. She cannot help but follow it, she is weary, but as she approaches the bird, it flies farther away, ever farther among the tree-tops. For the first time she feels that her smile withers, and the chaste shadow of melancholy falls across her girl's voice."

This is the hour of temptation. Danger is lurking in the woods and waters, but his hyacinthine hair is wreathed with roses, and his face is like the face of Love. She knows that her own body is a garden of Eden flowered with all perfumes to call thither the Elect:

> "Art thou waking, my perfume sunny,
> My perfume of gilded bees,
> Art thou floating along the breeze,
> My perfume of sweet honey?
>
> "In the hush of the gloam, when my feet
> Roam through the rich garden-closes,
> Dost thou tell I am coming, thou smell
> Of my lilies, and my warm roses?
>
> "Am I not like in this gloam a
> Cluster of fruit concealed
> By the leaves, and by nothing revealed,
> Save in the night its aroma?

"Does he know, now the hour is dim,
That I am half opening my hair,
Does he know that it scents the air,
Does its odour reach to him?

"Does he feel I am straining my arms?
And that the lilies of my valleys
Are dewy with passion-balm
That for his touching tarries?"

Men come to her, and she says, full of pity and tenderness:

"They can speak nothing yet,
But often their eyes are wet:
I am all things they ever have desired . . .
A dewy rose in the dawn am I. . . .
They are tired, so tired. . . .
They have long been coming to where I lie. . . ."

"Thus," to continue Jean Dominique's interpretation (which is all a-tremble with a loving penetration), "though nothing has troubled the unconsciousness and the simplicity of the man and the woman, by the same miracle of nature that in virgin forests bends down the flowering crown of a tree over another that it is to fertilise—thus, in this landscape of Eden a sacred song unites those who were created for Love and Death—and for our sister, Melancholy."

The third book, *La Faute*, bears this maxim

of Nietzsche: *All is innocence.* Eve has not sinned, she has fulfilled the destiny of woman—and man. Before, her eyes had seen the outer world; now her soul finds the inner world. She is complete, and she has completed her mate. But, having reached the height of her ascent, she must descend—to Death. The shadows fall over Eden, and the angel Azrael comes.

It is a thankless criticism of *La Chanson d'Ève* to say that it is nebulous, that the intention does not emerge clearly. To those who have an ear for verbal music but who are too mentally idle to unravel the runes of a symbol, it might have the effect of music without words. Even that would be something; but those who do not care for the obvious in poetry find much more than subtle melodies in this masterpiece of a great poet.

There is no obscurity in *Pan*, at all events. The obscurantists were quick to find the meaning, and to denounce it. By this comedy, far and away the best in Belgian literature, van Lerberghe made himself impossible in official Belgium and in orthodox society (to which by upbringing he belonged). And yet the play is no more than a rollicking pre-

sentation of Pantheism. Perhaps van Lerberghe was the only Belgian poet of his generation who might have developed into a great dramatist; the characters of *Pan* at all events, including the delightful *bouc communal*, have the red life's blood of the stage. But owing to its risky character *Pan* can never be a repertory play.

The name of Grégoire Le Roy is indissolubly associated with those of Maeterlinck and van Lerberghe. It was at his house that van Lerberghe was struck down in September 1906; and it was Le Roy who revealed Maeterlinck to the circle of *La Pléiade* in Paris, when he read his friend's story *The Massacre of the Innocents* to them. Grégoire Le Roy, who was born in 1862 in Ghent, has had many irons in the fire, and it is only in recent years that, obtaining an appointment (after official insults) as Librarian of the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts at Brussels, he has settled down to write poems and tales. He abandoned jurisprudence to study painting (for a time in Paris); he abandoned painting to be an electrical engineer ("Grégoire l'électrique" van Lerberghe calls him quizzingly in his correspondence); and he aban-

doned that profession, apparently to be a dreamer. In 1887 appeared his little volume of verse, *La Chanson du Soir* (edition of twenty copies—*avis aux amateurs !*). *Mon Cœur pleure d'autrefois* followed, in an *édition de luxe*,[1] in 1889. These two volumes are now united in *La Chanson du Pauvre*, a not voluminous yellow-back published by the *Mercure de France*. It would be idle to claim too much importance for these poems. They have a distinctive charm, a *cachet* of pensive melancholy. But, with the exception of a few, they are not markedly original in phrasing or rhythm. Grégoire Le Roy is the poet of an attitude : he is (even in his earlier years) "the silvery sentimentalist of old age" dreaming of the things of the past, an emancipated moralist offering sage counsels to inconsiderate youth. One of his poems, *Le Passé qui File* (The Spinster Past), is the favourite poem of Belgian reciters ; it is as ubiquitous as Longfellow's *Psalm of Life* ; more than any other Belgian poem it has become a folksong. It is that rare thing, a poem of simple and popular appeal written by

[1] With drawings by Fernand Khnopff and a frontispiece by Georges Minne.

a Primitive Symbolist (but Grégoire Le Roy never wrote Mallarmese—he adopted the stock figures of speech and the assonances of the symbolist tribe, but not their remoteness and complexity):

"The old woman spins, and her wheel
Is prattling of old, old things;
As though to a doll she sings,
And memories over her steal.

"The hemp is yellow and long,
The old woman spins the thread,
Bending her white weary head
Over the wheel's lying song.

"The wheel goes round with a whirl,
The yellow hemp is unwound,
She turns it round and round,
She is playing like a girl.

"The yellow hemp is unwound,
She sees herself a girl,
As blonde as the skeins that whirl,
She is dancing round and round.

"The wheel rolls round with a whirr,
And the hemp is humming as well,
She hears an old lover tell
And whisper his love for her.

"Her tired hands rest above
The wheel, her spinning is done;
And with the hemp are spun
Her memories of love."

For about twenty years Le Roy published nothing new. Then he became editor of *Le Masque;* and his talent seemed to take on a new lease of youth, which enabled him to revive his legend of dreamful eld. *La Couronne des Soirs* (1911) has a new note of wise tenderness, of contentment with nature under the very wings of Death.

This legendary greybeard's recollections of olden days have now a dulled regret of physical sensations:

"My poor hands, so wan and faded,
Agile once as a bird,
My rhythms of speech you aided,
And by my brain you were stirred;

"Poor wrinkled hands, like two
Old women worn and wizened,
My thoughts run on, but you
In listlessness are prisoned.

"Yet I bless you, my hands, now that strife
Is done, and the heart reposes;
You taught me the touch of roses,
And the caresses of life."

But it needed *Le Rouet et la Besace* (The Spinning-Wheel and the Wallet) to discover all the fascination of Grégoire Le Roy's mystic Muse. This *édition de luxe* is ornamented by the poet's own drawings—wonderful pictures which actually seem to be more laden with poetry than the poems themselves. Here is the hearth corner, with the cane-bottomed chair and the spinning-wheel and the wallet; and the wallet, dreaming of all the roads of the earth, chides the spinning-wheel for its love of the hearth-corner. Here is the picture of a lonely cottage half hidden behind a row of poplar-trees, set in the midst of bare, flat fields that seem to stretch to infinity, and the legend is: "Will he come?"—Somebody is waiting for somebody to come, watching the horizon, wearily. Here are Flemish houses, all higgledy-piggledy with their gables and their skylights, overshadowing a Flemish river, where boats are gliding on to the sea in an endless procession: perhaps one of them will bring happiness to the watcher at the window; perhaps happiness has already glided past. . . . Here is the end of a village with a broken-down old pilgrim come home

at last: do you remember, lady, the pensive poet who was your guest long ago? He has pilgrimed round his heart and the world, and now he is the old man who has come back to you. . . . Here are the black masts of a great ship against the setting sun, and serried ranks of emigrants marching thither—the poet has seen them passing and passing to their far adventures; as for him, he has never left his home and his little garden. But he has seen everything, and his wandering soul is tired of everything, and *his* ship, his little barque, is waiting to take him to the farther shore. Here—a drawing of almost unendurable sadness—is an old man playing a guitar in a deserted, cobbled street; his cloak and beard are ragged, his face is haggard with hopeless despair—and he is singing of love.

If *Le Rouet et la Besace* is an old man's book, it proves that Grégoire Le Roy had to grow old before he could realise his legend. It is stronger, because it is sadder, than the books of the poet's youth. After all, in those days, *autrefois* was the future.

There is a sage's gentle philosophy, too, in *Joe Trimborn* (1913), the collection of short stories

which must have come as a surprise to those who thought Le Roy was a lyrist pure and simple. They would be among the most remarkable of Belgian short stories if only by virtue of their quaint humour. Perhaps it is not betraying too much of a secret if one mentions, too, that *Contes d'Après Minuit* (Brussels, 1913), a book of grotesque stories with a satirical vein, are by Grégoire Le Roy. If one may read between the lines of the preface, they owe something to the collaboration of Charles van Lerberghe.

Albert Mockel is as complex as Grégoire Le Roy is simple. There is an outward show of simplicity in his learnèd verse, due to his imitation of old folksongs, but the appearance is very deceptive. His first volume of verse, *Chantefable un peu naïve*, which had considerable influence on the symbolist movement, is as difficult to explore as a virgin forest. But if it is a virgin forest of packed and tufted ideas, there is a delirious music singing in the branches, and to the strayed reveller who is lost therein and beguiled it does not seem to be at all important to find a path out of the wood.

Mockel was editor, at Liége, of *La Wallonie* when *Chantefable un peu naïve* gave him his captaincy in the symbolist army. *La Wallonie* was one of the most important of the symbolist reviews, for France as well as for Belgium. In its pages are to be found poems by the most distinguished French and Belgian poets of the day, side by side with the promising work of Belgian writers—Auguste Vierset, Hector Chainaye, Célestin Demblon, Jules Destrée—who have since been more or less lost to literature in the busy tides of journalism or politics. With Liége Mockel's whole life is connected: he was born in the province (1866), he was educated there, and, though for some years he has resided in Paris and the neighbourhood, he has returned periodically to conduct his Walloon campaign. With Jules Destrée he is a leader of those Belgians who see a national peril in the machinations of the Flemings; and in the interest of the cause he has so much at heart he has written and set to music his famous *Chant de la Wallonie,* a party cry which may yet (unless the war brings sager counsels) become a battle cry. Strange to say,

this ardent champion of French culture against Germanic culture is himself of German descent!

Mockel's ripest verse which has so far been published in book form is contained in *Clartés* (1902), though fragments have appeared from time to time in journals of a new volume, *La Flamme Immortelle.* One of the best poems in *Clartés* is the "Song of Running Water." It sings the transitoriness of all that is: everything flows away like a river, impelled beyond the bounds of time by resistless desire.

The symbols of some of the other poems are more transparent. "The Goblet," for instance, is Woman, or (more narrowly) the Courtesan:

"Every hand that touches me I greet
With kisses welcoming, caresses sweet.

"Thus in my crystal's naked beauty, I—
With nothing save a little gold as on my lips a dye—
Give myself wholly to the mouth unknown
That seeks the burning of my own.

"Queen of joy,—queen and slave—
Mistress that taken passes on again,
Mocking the love she throws to still
Desire, I have blown madness at my pleasure's will
To the four winds that rave.

"Say you that I am vain?
List!
I am feeble, scarcely I exist. . . .
Yet listen: for I can be everything.

"This mouth, that never any kiss could close,
Capriciously in subtle fires it blows,
The jewelled garlands of a shadowy blossoming.

. . . . . .

"For the lover drunken on my lips that burn,
Whether he pour in turn
The wines of gold and flame or love's wave to my rim,
Drinks from my soul for ever strange to him
A queenly splendour or the radiance of the skies,
Or fury scorching where the harmful ruby lies
In the bitter counsel of my jealous topazes.

"And, tears or joy, delirium, daring drunkenness,
From all this passion that to his is married
Nothing of me will gush unto his arid
Lips, save the simple and the limpid light
Whose gleam is wedded to my empty chalice.

"What matter? I have given Desire his cloudland palace,
And on my courtesan's bare breast
Love lets the hope of his diaphanous flight
Languish, and softly rest. . . .
And I laugh, the fragile, frivolous sister of Eve!
For me in nights of madness drunken hands upheave

Higher than all foreheads to the constellated skies,
And then I am the sudden star of lies,
That into troubled joys darts deep its radiant gleam—
The sweet, perfidious happiness of Dream."

Mockel's prose is more widely read than his verse. Unfortunately, much of the good prose he wrote for *La Wallonie* and other journals, at the time when he was described by Célestin Demblon as "a Walloon dandy, outrageously intellectual and despotically symbolistic," has not been quarried by the publishers. A little book of his in which he caricatured his colleagues and himself, *Les Fumistes Wallons*, appeared in 1887; but, like *Chantefable*, this book cannot now be got for love or money. (It is doubly a collector's book: it is a document in the history of the symbolist movement, and its very beautiful frontispiece was the first published work of Armand Rassenfosse.) His volumes of criticism which still remain on sale are *Propos de Littérature* (1894), a meticulous comparison and interpretation of Henri de Régnier and Francis Vielé-Griffin; *Émile Verhaeren* (1895); *Stéphane Mallarmé* (1899), the most authoritative criticism extant of the origins and aims of sym-

bolism; *Charles van Lerberghe* (1904), adequate as an interpretation but not sufficiently extensive as biography; and *Victor Rousseau*, a book on the great Belgian sculptor who during the war has been the guest of Lord Milner. Very rarely indeed has Mockel written criticism which has been belied by time. What he has once said, holds good in spite of all apotheoses and reactions.

The prose-writers of *La Wallonie* affected Mallarmese. In other words their style was affected. Mallarmese prose as written by Mallarmé was a miracle of *Stimmung*, something absolutely original, the weft and woof of a rare personality; but the imitative prose of his admirers, tainted often by a farther aberration in the direction of René Ghil, is sometimes curious, sometimes diverting, and sometimes appalling. Albert Mockel and several others, however, became great virtuosos in this "symphonic prose," although it should be noted that in their riper years they returned to a saner style. What they were trying to do was to write poetry in prose: even Mockel's criticism is often in the nature of a prose poem, and that is what gives it a more permanent value than the voluminous

academic criticism of such lucid and shallow writers as Faguet. Mockel is as much a stylist as Walter Pater was.

"Nothing is nearer a very lyrical song," says Mockel in the preface to his *Contes pour les Enfants d'Hier* (1908), "than a violently burlesque tale." This is a theory, by the most logical and conscientious theorist of Belgian literature, a theorist whose works are usually exemplifications of his theories. But the *Contes pour les Enfants d'Hier* (Tales for the Children of Yesterday) have not the appearance of having sprung from a theory; they seem rather to have been born of sheer delight in the burlesque; and in this case probably the theory was deduced from the completed work. The symbolists, it must be admitted, rode theories to death—indeed, some of the most gifted of them theorised themselves to death; but these tales of Mockel at all events are fresh with the greenness of the tree of life. From Edmund Gosse they won Mockel the title of "a Belgian Ariosto"; and there is adventure enough in them to justify the praise, but it is the playful Gallic wit and the

scintillant satire that make the great merit of the book.

La Wallonie lasted seven years—a long life for a review which printed nothing but literature. As it declined, another Liége journal, *Floréal*, founded in 1892 by Paul Gérardy, progressed apace, cheered on and congratulated even by its dying rival. Paul Gérardy is a curious case. He is a Prussian subject, born in the year of blood at Saint-Vith near Malmédy. His culture is certainly half German. One of his best books, *À la Gloire de Böcklin*, is lyric praise of a German painter. And he has written German poetry of distinction, which is all gathered into the harvest of that masterful chief of formalists, Stefan George. And yet Gérardy hates Prussia, like a true Belgian; and his French poetry is more likely to live than his German poetry. His verses, which are collected in *Roseaux* (1898), have the naïveté of folk-songs. How simple and subtle is "Of Sad Joy":

> "I am angry with you, little girl,
> Because of your gracious smiles,
> And your restful lips, and teeth of pearl,
> And the black glitter of your great eyes.

"I am angry with you, but on my knees,
For when I went away, in happy wise,
Far from you, far as goes the breeze,
I could think of nothing but of your eyes.

"I was timid, I never looked back,
And I went singing as madmen do,
To forget your eyes, alack!
But my song was all about you."

"Some Song or Other" is a little snatch of music that holds all the melancholy of the symbolist attitude:

"The song of moonlight all
That trembles as aspens shake,
The thrush sang it at the evenfall
To the listening swan on the blue lake.

"It is all of love and distress,
And of joy and love, and then
There are sobs of gold and weariness,
And ever comes joy back again.

"Far, far away flew the thrush,
And the swan went pondering
All the new words, by lily and rush,
With his head underneath his wing."

Gérardy is the one satirist of the Belgians. (Courouble deals rather in caricature; and the satire

of Mockel's *Contes pour les Enfants d'Hier* is softened by the grotesqueness of burlesque). *Les Carnets du Roi* (1903) is a delightful satire on the late King Leopold—so delightful that his Majesty himself is said to have read it with immense gusto. *Le Chinois tel qu'on le parle* (1903) shows up the Belgian magistracy. A satire which will no doubt be reprinted and have a long lease of life is *S. M. Patacake, Empereur d'Occitanie* (1904); the hero is the German Emperor. Gérardy, by the way, is the editor of the new Belgian paper, *La Belgique Nouvelle*.

Another poet of Liége is Isi-Collin, who founded the review *Antée*, which published much new work of importance, including translations of Arthur Symons. *Antée* was the organ of the "idéo-réaliste" school. Isi-Collin's *La Vallée Heureuse* (1903) garners the harvest of a quiet eye: here are notations of nature pregnant with the very essence of poetry. The verse has a stately build (Isi-Collin, like Paul Gérardy, has learnt much from Mockel—these three might be grouped together as the Liége school); it has the music of an organ heard from afar.

La Vallée Heureuse, with its frontispiece by Armand Rassenfosse, is a book for collectors of beautiful editions (those true bibliophiles who handle their treasures with loving fingers and rarely risk soiling the thick pages by reading them). For these people Isi-Collin's *La Divine Rencontre*, published by Desoer at Liége in 1913, is a prize beyond estimation. The printing and the ornamentation are so beautiful that the contents almost seem to fade into insignificance. And yet there is purport in this chiselled prose: a pantheist steeped in modernism goes forth into the forest and meets Pan himself. They have some conversation, but—the pantheist does not understand Pan, and he returns to town, to the pantheism of his three-franc-fifty yellow-backs . . . for your modern pantheist is "sincerely artificial and artificially sincere." ("If you were an animal, well and good," says Nietzsche, "but to be an animal you would have to be innocent.") *Sisyphe et le Juif Errant*, finally, is a dramatic dialogue published in 1914, and produced by The Pioneer Players in London on March 7th, 1915.

When literary men are gathered together and

the futile question is asked: Who is the greatest of Belgian poets? there would be some who would leap over Charles van Lerberghe and give the highest rank to that tender and delicate dreamer cloistered in Antwerp, Max Elskamp, he whose voice, once vibrating with a very frenzy of happiness, has now grown silent in sadness. Elskamp is not so powerful as Verhaeren, for he sings in a tower of ivory, not in the roaring world; he is not so perfect a melodist as van Lerberghe, but by how slight a degree does he come second! And he has qualities which no other poet has: if van Lerberghe shadows forth the soul of Man and Woman, the sources of being, the rapture of consummation, the sadness of knowledge, Elskamp images the universe in his own happy Flanders, the Flanders of Holy Church, mirrors his own soul (which is the soul of Man) in that of his native city of Antwerp. All the joy of pure and contrite hearts wells up in the verse of Max Elskamp, in his anthems of the Sabbath—for the Sabbath is joy; and when he weaves, like a black thread in a golden woof, the weariness of the working-days (which are death) into the singing ecstasy of his

fervour, it is only such a weariness as a saintly worshipper feels in the week's dust, because the Sabbath with its peace and devotion is long in coming, and even so he consoles with the promise of a Sunday that shall aye endure, "and all at the heart of a far domain." No one can mistake the very passion of ecstasy there is in the darkest-coloured of Max Elskamp's songs:

> "Oh, Mary Mother, be a black-robed nun . . .
> Now is the season of all suffering come . . ."

—is not that a call to the ecstasy of suffering, suffering which is a source of joy eternal, and therefore itself a joy? Sunday bells ring all through the melodies of this dizzily dreaming mystic, in Flanders with its poplar-shaded ways by the sea that kisses the yellow dunes.

The highest praise that can be given to any poet is to say that he is original, that he himself and no other man is all he has sung. Of Max Elskamp this can be said with confidence. An academic critic with his ferreting nose and unseeing eyes might trace the outward shape of the stanzas, some of the tricks of diction, the enchanting asson-

ances which disgust one for ever with the formalist's welter of close-fitting rhymes, to the quaint irregularities of the folksong. It needs no great reading to find out that Georges Khnopff, another Flemish mystic on whose frail verse the dust of neglect is gathering now, had fashioned such symbolist hymns before Elskamp; but the inner music, all the miracle of meaning, all the fervour of the song rising to a height where the human voice can go no farther and must rest—all this is Elskamp's own, and there is nothing at all like it in any other man's verse.

Max Elskamp was born of a French mother and a Flemish father in 1862 in Antwerp, in a street where the flags of the Consulates tell of distant lands whence come the ships "clustered like a choir" in the harbour. He grew up among merchandise (for his grandfather was a shipper); and commerce was a dream to him. *Dominical* (1892) was his first book. It was a beautiful edition with a cover ornamented by Henry Van de Velde, that great Flemish artist who, finding scant encouragement in his own country, emigrated to Germany and there, continuing the work of William

Morris, inaugurated a new era in decorative art.[1] Van de Velde, too, ornamented the next three volumes of Elskamp: *Salutations, dont d'Angéliques* (1893); *En Symbole vers l'Apostolat* (1895); and *Six Chansons de Pauvre Homme* (1896). These four books are collected in *La Louange de la Vie*, published by the *Mercure de France* in 1898. The next volume of verse, *Enluminures* (1898), is illustrated by the poet himself.

Few symbolist authors need interpreting more than Max Elskamp. It is not that his symbols are recondite—as a matter of fact they are so restricted that a little familiarity makes them seem quite natural and clear. The difficulty is that he makes use of local customs and of fragments of old ballads. As an example of his difficulty, a famous poem from *Dominical* might be taken:

"And the town of My thousand souls,
Do you sleep, do you sleep?
It is Sunday, My women folks,
And My town, do you sleep?

[1] Henry Van de Velde's most important criticism is in German (*Essays*, Insel-Verlag, Leipzig, 1910).

"And you Jews, the shame of My alleys,
Do you sleep, do you sleep?
—Antiquities and Laces—
Even the Jews, do you sleep?

"And you, My gentle candle-merchants,
Do you sleep, do you sleep?
While Her litanies soar to the Virgin,
Do you sleep, do you sleep?

"Steeples, your hours have been stolen,
Do you sleep, do you sleep?
Friar Jacques, in the habitation
Of what sleep do you sleep?

"Good people, this is the Sabbath
And the windows with frost are hoar,
In the city that the flags of
The Consulates are hanging o'er."

The general sense, even in the rude translation, should be clear at first reading. The Virgin is bending over a Flemish city, which the last line localises as Antwerp; it is a Sabbath morning bright with hoar-frost; and the virgin is waiting for the bells to begin and ring Her good people to Church. That is the mood, a mood of glad expectancy of the joys of the Sabbath, the first hush of the ecstasy of worship. But the essence

of this poem is its blending of the mood with a most delicate humour. That gay words and positive chaffing should be placed in the mouth of the Holy Virgin is quite in the spirit of the old Flemish songs which are ever at the back of Max Elskamp's mind—in the folksong the humour would very likely have been coarse: Elskamp refines it, that is all. The virgin, then, waiting for the incense of Her bells, chides Her women for lying abed; She mocks the Jews in the old curiosity shops in the side streets; nay, the very merchants of Her holy candles are still sleeping; the steeples seem to think that their bells have gone on their annual pilgrimage to Rome; and even Friar Jacques is sleeping yet, he of the old song that everybody knows:

> "Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques,
> Dormez-vous, dormez-vous?
> Sonnez les matines,
> Bim! Bam! Boum!"

(Notice the assonance in the folksong—*vous: Boum:* Elskamp has many such.) The last stanza has the superb musical climax of so many of Elskamp's songs: at this moment, one imagines,

the bells ring out, Friar James having run up into the belfry tower three steps at a time at the Virgin's gentle chiding; and now the good burghers' dames come forth, and the candle-merchant is ready with his wares, and the Jews in the by-streets peer out over the curios and the old lace in their shop-windows, and the sun shines out on the hoar-frost and the waving banners of the Consulates.

That is the manner of the poems in *La Louange de la Vie.* You must know the key-words; then your heart can dance along with the verse, dance as the very trees dance when joy (or Sunday) is in the land.

There is not in Elskamp's verse the sudden shock of the sublime, but there is the continuous thrill of images full of grace and charm. Poem sings to poem; the music swells and sinks; the whole book is a peal of belfry bells. Everything is in harmony with the Roman Catholic ritual; and the good Catholics find nothing offensive in the playful spirit that makes symbols of the Virgin and Jesus, and expresses an artist's disgust with ugly things by dreaming that the Mother of God

looks down on drunken soldiers reeling through the streets of Antwerp and mourns:

> "And I am sad as with the brandy
> Which brings the soldiers late to barracks,
> Upon the Sunday drunk with brandy,
> Within My streets all full of soldiers,
> I have the sadness of much brandy."

Enluminures is merely a continuation of *La Louange de la Vie.* All Elskamp's work is this Song of Praise; all his poems illuminate the manuscript of Life in its holy moods. One of the poems of this volume seems to me to be the very finest of those songs which ring rhymes on a religious anachronism:

> "And Mary reads a Gospel-page,
> With folded hands in the silent hours,
> And Mary reads a Gospel-page,
> Where the meadow sings with flowers.
>
> "And all the flowers that star the ground,
> In the far emerald of the grass,
> Tell Her how sweet a life they pass,
> With simple words of dulcet sound.
>
> "And now the angels in the cloud,
> And the birds too in chorus sing,
> While the beasts graze, with foreheads bowed,
> The plants of scented blossoming.

"And Mary reads a Gospel-page,
The pealing hours She overhears,
Forgets the time, and all the years,
For Mary reads a Gospel-page.

"And masons building cities go
Homeward in the evening hours,
And o'er gilt cocks on belfry towers
Clouds and breezes pass and blow."

There may be people to whom these symbols may seem childish. They are not childish, but they are childlike. What a naïve symbol is that of the Jews—"Jews of shame with grey hair"—eyesores in a world where Jesus is all rosy and the sky all azure. Elskamp is not necessarily an anti-Semite—all that he does is (for the purpose of poetry) to look at Jews "as those in Brittany and childhood do." The jaundiced Protestant, too, would be wrong if he thought the Gospel that Max Elskamp preaches a glaringly Roman Catholic gospel. Let it be whispered that Max Elskamp is a freethinker. . . .

But orthodox Roman Catholic poets there *are* in Belgium, the poets who have written for *Le Spectateur Catholique* and *Durendal*. The chief of them are: Victor Kinon, Thomas Braun,

Georges Ramaekers, and Pierre Nothomb. Victor Kinon was associated from its first number with *Le Spectateur Catholique*, a review started by the essayist Edmond de Bruyn, who with Max Elskamp established the Museum of Folklore at Antwerp. Kinon's lyric verse is collected in *L'Âme des Saisons* (1909). The prevailing note is (if an epigram may be risked) one of realistic mysticism. There are songs which outwardly are in Elskamp's manner; but the world they move in is real, not Elskamp's dream-world. Kinon's religious fervour has almost the directness of a Salvation Army preacher:

> "Boiled, boiled again, and carbonized
> Be the old serpent of sin and lies!
>
> . . . . .
>
> Pulverized, trod under feet,
> Be the old serpent of deceit!"

But there is another note: that of simplicity in the description of nature, the simplicity of which Francis Jammes is the great master. Kinon (who in spite of his surname is a Fleming) has the vivid colouring of his race:

"The stainless snow and the blue,
Lit by a pure gold star,
Nearly meet ; but a bar
Of fire separates the two.

"A rime-frosted black pinewood,
Raising, as waves roll foam,
Its lances toothed like a comb,
Dams the horizon's blood.

"In the tomb of blue and white
Nothing stirs save a crow,
Unfolding, solemnly slow,
Its silky wing black as night."

Some of his literary criticism (though he is one of the acknowledged mouthpieces of his Church, his verdicts are never intolerant) is collected in *Portraits d'Auteurs* (1910).

The influence of Francis Jammes is obvious and confessed in the poetry of Thomas Braun, who has, moreover, written a little book on the master of Orthez (*Des Poètes Simples: Francis Jammes*). Braun is a Walloon of German descent, but he must be part Fleming, for Verhaeren is his uncle. The fine flower of his genius blooms for evermore in his *Le Livre des Bénédictions*, a

beautifully printed and illustrated book produced in 1900 under the auspices of *Le Spectateur Catholique.* These quaint benedictions of the nuptial ring, of the child, of the house, of bread, wine, beer, cheese, &c., summon up all the technical details of the subject to make them sing a robust poetry. Over the Benediction of Beer is a foaming mug wreathed with the Flemish legend "Bier in de volle Pot," and the invocation to the Lord, "Quam ex adipe frumenti producere dignatus es."

What a jolly religion this Roman Catholicism of Flanders is! Here is an invocation full of reverence—hands folded by the foaming mug—which rolls out the names of the national brews as though the Great Brewer of all—for His are the malt and the hops and the glucose and all the other ingredients—were personally familiar with the taste of each. There is the same monk's humour (as of a genuinely pious Friar Tuck) in "The Benediction of the Cheeses":

"When from the void, good Lord, this earth You raised,
You made vast pasture-lands where cattle grazed,
Where shepherds led their flocks, and shore their fleeces,
And scraped their hides, and cut them into pieces,

When they had eaten all their nobler flesh,
Which with earth's virgin odour still was fresh.
O'er Herve's plateaux our cattle pass, and browse
The ripe grass which the mist of summer bows,
And over which the scents of forests stream.
They give us butter, curds, and milk, and cream.
God of the fields, Your cheeses bless to-day,
For which Your thankful people kneel and pray.
Let them be fat or light, with onions blent,
Shallots, brine, pepper, honey; whether scent
Of sheep or fields is in them, in the yard
Let them, good Lord, at dawn be beaten hard;
And let their edges take on silvery shades
Under the most red hands of dairymaids;
And, round and greenish, let them go to town
Weighing the shepherd's folding mantle down;
Whether from Parma or from Jura heights,
Kneaded by august hands of Carmelites,
Stamped with the mitre of a proud abbess,
Flowered with the fragrance of the grass of Bresse,
From Brie, hills of the Vosges, or Holland's plain,
From Roquefort, Gorgonzola, or from Spain!
Bless them, good Lord! Bless Stilton's royal fare,
Red[1] Cheshire, and the tearful, cream Gruyère!
Bless Kantercaas, and bless the Mayence round,
Where aniseed and other grains are found;
Bless Edam, Pottekees, and Gouda then,
And those that we salute with 'Sir,'[2] like men."

[1] The Dutch cheese which goes by the name of "Cheshire" is red.

[2] Refers to the French cheese called "Monsieur fromage."

There is a more cosmopolitan strangeness in *Philatélie* (1910). It is a rhymed catalogue of stamps, that is all; but there is poetry in the rhymes. How playful and tender is this Dutch stamp:

> "Pauvre petite Wilhelmine,
> tulipe des pays des Cimbres,
> eus-tu toujours si fraîche mine
> et tant de joie que sur ces timbres?"

In *Fumée d'Ardenne* (1912) we have a Thomas Braun who has grown elegiac. It is good verse, but it has not the strangeness and the almost unconscious humour of the Benedictions. It is a hunter's book, written in the Ardennes during the long vacation of the Law Courts. For Thomas Braun is not some portly abbot with a well-stocked cellar, he is a busy lawyer in Brussels. He is represented in the British Museum catalogue by a learned book on commercial law—by this and no other. . . . And yet he is poet sufficiently important to have had a book written on him—*Thomas Braun*, by Albert de Bersaucourt (Paris, 1913).

Symbolism runs riot in the verse of Georges

Ramaekers (*Le Chant des Trois Règnes*, 1906; *Les Saisons Mystiques*, 1910). His Roman Catholic fervour knows no bounds; but the poetry he reads into his sectarian symbols is so striking that he may well be read with pleasure by the very heretics he denounces as mushrooms:

"In the autumnal thicket, thinned
Along its mournful arches by the wind,
No longer to dead twigs but sapwood quick,
Corrupting trunks that time left whole,
The reeking parasites in millions stick,
Like to the carnal ill that gnaws the soul
Of those who at the feet of women fawn.

"And Hell has blessed their countless spawn.

"And though they cannot reach the surging tops
Of the unshaken columns of the Church,
In spreading crops
The parasites with poison smirch
And mottle with strange stains the fruits
The Monstrance ripens in the groves of Rome.

"Trusting that ancient orchard's sainted roots,
Whoever of the leprous apples eats
Shall feel his faith grow darkened with a gloam
That filters heresy's corroding sweets.

"More hideous than saprophytes,
And therefore for the sacrilege more fit,
Upon the Corn and Vinestock sit
Minute and miserable parasites;
And o'er the Eucharist their tiny bellies,
To eat and crimson it, have crept.
Their occult plague has for three hundred years
Eaten the very hope of mystic ears,
Wherever the Christian harvester has slept."

(This admission must surely be rather encouraging to the heretics whose venene putrescence Ramaekers would no doubt like to burn with a flame more consuming than that of his verse. But note now how he trounces the German higher critics, who breed the spawn :)

"And while, in the land of heavy, yellow beers,
In the brewing-vat of barren exegeses
Some new-found yeast for ever effervesces,
The saints whose blood turns sick and rots,
Waiting till a second Nero shall
For their cremation light a golden carnival,
Behold their bodies decked with livid spots."

Ramaekers has such a command of the most unexpected and rash images, which create a style as though in his heart-felt sincerity he had made

all the extravagances of burlesque seem the simple and inevitable expression of his fervour, that one would wish him to write an epic denunciation of the German invasion of his country. There would be more force in his indignation than there is in Pierre Nothomb's *Les Barbares en Belgique* (1915). Nothomb's *Notre Dame du Matin* is comparatively restrained in its mysticism, though the poems seem to blend the Virgin Mary and some earthly maiden. They are poems of religious exaltation troubled, as spring proceeds to summer, by the first stirrings of a shy sensuality. It is a book for the pure in heart.

The most Mallarmean of the Belgian symbolists is André Fontainas. He settled in Paris in 1888, and was (like Mockel) a close friend of Mallarmé. His poems, which are collected in *Crépuscules* (1897) and *La Nef Désemparée* (1908) are Pre-Raphaelite in colouring:

> "With right arm on the open casement rim,
> The negro king Cophetua, with sad mien,
> And eyes that do not see, looks at the green
> Autumnal ocean rolling under him.

"His listless dream goes wandering without goal ;
He is not one who would be passion's slave ;
And no remorse, nor memory from its grave
May haunt the leisure of his empty soul.

"He does not hear the melancholy chaunt
Of girls who beg before him, hollow, gaunt
With fainting, coughing in the mellow sun,

"And unawares, he knows not how it came,
He feels within his hardened heart a flame,
And burns his eyes at the eyes of the youngest one."

It is not the subtle and gorgeous colouring of his verse, however, which makes Fontainas one of the most permanently interesting of Belgian poets: he is past master of that mystery, that breathed intangible suggestion, for which the symbolists lived charmed lives. The utmost refinement of the theme, the most floatingly musical expression of the idea, the rarest words, the most hidden "correspondencies"—all this, for which the symbolists most fervently strove, Fontainas achieved. What magic there is in his "Sea-scape:"

"Under basaltic porticoes of calm sea-caves,
Heavy with alga and the moss of fucus gold,

In the occult slow shaking of sea waves,
Among the alga in proud blooms unfold
The cups of pride of silent, slender gladioles. . . .

"The mystery wherein dies the rhythm of the waves
In gleams of kisses long and calm unrolls,
And the red coral whereon writhes the alga cold
Stretches out arms that bleed with calm flowers, and beholds
Its gleams reflected in the rest of waves.

"Now here you stand in gardens flowered with alga, cold
In the nocturnal, distant song of waves,
Queen whose calm, pensive looks are glaucous gladioles,
Raising above the waves their light-filled bowls,
Among the alga on the coral where the ocean rolls."

A poet who has published surprisingly little (*L'Âme en Exil*, 1895), but who is yet in the inner circles of poets ranked with the best, is Georges Marlow. He is of English descent. One might say of him that he writes too well to write much. Some of his poems are saturated with an almost intolerable pain. He is a true brother in song of Grégoire Le Roy : both poets express a melancholy which verges on helplessness, Marlow with more intensity and less artlessness. Marlow's *Souls of the Evening* evokes some street in a dead Flemish

city near a canal; and the weary poet wandering there (weary with a heart pent full of Christian charity and tender regret) hears the voices of old women singing hymns while they spin:

"While the spindle merrily sings,
Old women sing your complaint,
The gas-lamps are misty and faint,
And the night to the water clings.

"Now Jesus walks where greens
The dark, cobbled alley, and rests
His poor, pierced hands on the breasts
Of dreaming Magdalenes;

"And of every orphan child,
And of houses holy with prayer,
Mary Mother has care . . .
Sing, Jesus meek and mild

"Stands in your doorways' gloom,
And hears your hymn beseech. . . .
Let the honey of his speech
Your desolate hearts perfume! . . .

"The Shepherd of straying sheep
Shall lead you home to the fold . . .
But your soul, old women, must weep,
Remembering its wounds of old,

"Love, and the heart's long burn,
The wounds of hope ever sick,
And childhood's dreams falling quick,
Shed and dead turn by turn.

"Lord, on old women have pity,
Whose soul, fair fragile toy,
Touched by the kiss of the city,
Dreams of the Sun of Joy!"

There is one Belgian woman poet. This is Jean Dominique, who has published: *La Gaule Blanche* (1903); *L'Anémone des Mers* (1906); *L'Aile Mouillée* (1909); and *Le Puits d'Azur* (1912). The name, of course, is a pseudonym, but it is common knowledge that she who has made it famous is an elementary teacher in Brussels—a willing teacher of little children, for she loves them. Like her great master, Charles van Lerberghe, she is a poets' poet; the masses will not pierce her secrets. How should the reading public understand such delicate tracery as:

"My sylvan soul, so full of nests and warm,
Remembering thy flown birds with pangs how keen,
Shalt thou not ever, in parched summer's breath,
Hang like a humming heart and keep the swarm
Of gilded bees bearing their golden queen
Upon their orphan heart more sad than death? . . .

"And shalt thou ever of ecstatic nights,
And of the royal Summer crossing earth,
Know but the printed foot in amorous flights
Of the red fawn, and shadow-dappled mirth? . . .

"Soul whom the Winter too shall cross ere long,
And, after, Passion's Spring as bindweeds strong,
More sad than death shalt thou not ever seize
This little orphan, golden queen, in state
Borne round the world upon the eddying breeze
By many a thousand longings that vibrate? . . ."

Of recent collections of verse by the younger men, one of the most outstanding is *Chant Provincial* (1913) by Jules Delacre. With tender melancholy it sings the aspects of a provincial town: the loneliness of hearts that dream of distant voyages but are cabined in musty rooms; the waste places where nettles grow by factories; religious processions with ridiculous people sweating along in their finery; taverns rich and poor, taverns filthy and luxurious—taverns everywhere; convents and schools; the lives of young mothers dulled by maternity; misery and snatched happiness and the ache of longing. All this the poet sings:

"For the young teacher's sake
Who, in the new pinewood of the primary school,

Where chromos glare,
Leads the long chorus of the alphabet,
And dreams, in the warm reek of wretchedness. . . .

"And for the conscript's sake
Come from his village where the heather clothes the rock.
He chooses in the stationer's shop,
A heart made of forget-me-nots, upon a cloud. . . .

"And for the servant's sake
Whose shining hands are worn with water,
And for the iron bed where rests her heart
Under the attic window of the loft
Full of the moon and of the scent of soap. . . .

"And for the sake of old maids in the afternoon
Endlessly mending meagre things
In rooms for ever closed,
Among old birds that warble,
Dogs in wool and family spites. . . .

"And for the sake of clerks in livid offices
That smell of acrid ink and dust;
And for the bankrupt manufacturer
Who, on the threshold of his ruin, hears
The motor stopping in his factory. . . .

"And for the station-master in the rain,
With not a hope of travel whistling trains away;
And for the young bride's sake whose life runs weary
In the new furniture of a dull marriage:
For all your sakes, you whom I love

"Because your happiness is buried hopelessly
In flats and basement dwellings self-contained;
For this black labourer's sake who has no profit
Of any of the joys of heaven and earth
And calls to me and says he is my brother. . . .

"Yes, for the sake of all these things. . . ."

Finally, there is a vein of rich ore in the wilderness of Prosper Roidot's verse (*Les Poèmes Pacifiques; La Lumière des Buis*). He is a poet who is nearer genius than talent; but his genius is troubled, and only flashes with a dark, spasmodic flame.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PARNASSIAN POETS

An interest almost pathetic attaches to the poets who upheld the banner of the Parnassian School. The *vers libre*, we are told, is as dead as a door-nail: even Verhaeren has now returned to the traditional metres. This may be true; but the fact remains that the great poetry, the poetry that will remain, in Belgian literature, was written by the *verslibristes* in their prime. At least one of the Parnassian poets, Albert Giraud, is a poet of the first rank, while Fernand Séverin has an evasive distinction which will always keep some of his poems in the anthologies; but one feels that even these poets have been hampered and held down by the shackles of an arbitrary prosody.

Giraud is first and foremost a colourist: it is not for nothing that he is a Fleming. There is almost an orgy of colouring, for instance, in his poem "Cordovans":

"You leathers red with autumn's, victory's dyes!
In some old oratory's night you blaze,
Where sleeps the heavy splendour of dead days;
You with your hues of epic, evening skies,
Mysterious as fiery meres of gold,
You dream of those who trailed their swords, and bowed
Above your cushions stamped with wafers proud
Their gashed tanned faces in the days of old,
With an odour of adventure in their capes.
Red leathers whom the peace of hangings drapes,
You are like tragic sunsets! Worn were ye
By legendary heroes, who enriched
The kings they served, and all the world bewitched,
And who upon a copper, kindled sea,
You Cordovans dyed deep with war and pride,
Embarked in summer cool of eventide!
You are chimerical with gathered lives;
Of new Americas you guard the gleams,
You sunk in dazzled and vermilion dreams,
In you the soul of ancient suns survives!"

Giraud is a poet who is home-sick for the past. In *Hors du Siècle* (1888), *La Guirlande des Dieux* (1910), and *La Frise Empourprée* (1912), he evokes the magnificence of the Renaissance, mourns its dead glories, purples his canvas with pictures of its vice. Pride is the keynote of his music—a contemptuous pride which is far removed

from the austere impassibility of the French Parnassians. "The abject multitude I detest," cries out the poet; "no cry from the present shall cross my threshold; and I will build myself a monument of pride wherein to bury myself from the godless crowd. I will work alone, in austere silence, nourishing my mind with ancient truths, and I will sleep, with my mouth full of earth, in the purple of the days I have called to life again." There is a great personal grief in these nobly chiselled poems of Giraud: a grief deepened by bitter experience after the playful melancholy of his first books, *Pierrot Lunaire* and *Pierrot Narcisse,* which show his consummate mastery of intricate measures. Fitted to the poet's pride and grief is the full-mouthed resonance of his vocabulary: "under the pride of his blood proud and splendid words rear in his voice like stallions." He has interpreted himself in his poignant poem "Resignation":

> "I have fought against myself, I have cried in pain,
> Writhed breathless in my wounded spirit's night,
> And with my life in rags, a piteous sight,
> I come out of the Hell which is my brain.

"I know full well to-day, my dream was mad;
My love of autumn was a crime, no doubt;
And like a nail I tear the yearning out
That my too simple heart for childhood had.

"My cross! Lance in my side! I bring to you
This verse like Christmas evenings white and calm,
When the sovran palpitation of the palm
Hovers against the heaven's freezing blue;

"This verse whereinto all my grief shall pass,
Verse of a man resigned, misunderstood,
Verse into which my love must shed its blood,
Long bleeding, like a sunset in stained glass."

Poetry like stained glass windows! Nothing else could characterise Giraud's style so well.

But the stained glass windows of his poems are not filled with saints. His characters are by preference voluptuous and vicious princes, cardinals, soldiers. His scenes of vice have a seductive glamour, and under their envelope of impersonal description peers the vehement and audacious approval of the poet. Giraud is an unashamed Satanist, the most brilliant heir of Baudelaire.

Belgian Satanism—the most intellectual expression of Satanism (for Maurice Rollinat's poetry

is mere dirt)—derives directly from Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal.* It was a fateful day for Iwan Gilkin when Albert Giraud at Louvain thrust this most eventful of modern books of verse into his hand. Giraud had saturated his mind with the exhalations of these poisonous flowers; Gilkin was overwhelmed by them. Giraud found a refuge from the horror of the present (which to him was only horrible because it was ugly) in the spectacular depravity of the Renaissance; Gilkin burrowed himself into the poisoned present, and dreamed a vision of Hell on Earth by the side of which all the other pessimistic books of the period are feeble and tame. He declares his purpose in "Psychology":

> "A surgeon, I the souls of men dissect,
> Bending my feverish brow above their shameless
> Perversions, sins, and vices, all their nameless
> Primitive lusts and appetites unchecked.
>
> "Upon my marble men and women spread
> Their open bellies, where I find the hidden
> Ulcers of passions filthy and forbidden,
> And probe the secret wounds of dramas dread.

"Then, while my arms with scrofulous blood are dyed,
I note in poems clear with scrupulous art
What my keen eyes in these dark deeps descried.

"And if I need a subject, I am able
To stretch myself on the dissecting table,
And drive the scalpel into my own heart."

He describes himself as a wicked gardener casting his seeds into hasty brains and watching the flowering of his poison. His denunciation of the modern city is absolutely without relief—"Unclean city," he hails it, "thou sewer wherein, with mud between their teeth and leprosy in their bodies, fetid carcasses croak, grimacing rites grotesque with age. . . ." He calls the capital "a dolorous fruit whose bursten skin and too ripened pulp dye their rich rottenness with green gold, violet, and red phosphorus; a fruit oozing a sickly sweet, thick, cancerous juice. . . ." He reviles the city, but his chiding hints of a perverse love:

"The penitent of cities damned am I.
In shameful taverns where rank liquors flow,
And in new Sodoms viciously aglow,
Where outrage hides its lusts with murder nigh,

"I watch in flaring nights with mournful eye,
And shuddering hear what monsters still we grow.
And all the crimes of men oppress me so
I call for vengeance to the angered sky.

"Wrathful as prophets went in Holy Writ,
I walk with haggard cheek in public places,
Confessing sins that I do not commit.

"And the Pharisees cry out with upturned faces:
I thank Thee, God, that I am not as this
Infamous poet by Thy judgment is!"

Unhappiness is to him a mental rapture: "Be sad; love unhappiness," whispers to him the black-winged angel that bends over his pillow, "unhappiness has the savour of a noble and impure virgin." His view of man's activity is withering: man, crawling through his native mud, is a vulgar tool of flesh perpetuating flesh, a mere ring of the vital Beast that writhes its long snake's belly through the infinite.

A hint of these exasperated images is sufficient to show that they overshoot the mark of poetry. Gilkin's *La Nuit* (his only book of verse that counts) is exceedingly interesting as the most outspoken elaboration of Satanistic pessimism; but it has about the same relation to poetry as very

good scene-painting has to the painting of an artist —it has glamour and great effect when seen from a distance and in its proper historical perspective; but it will not bear too close inspection. At all events it has one great quality—it proves the absurdity (as a poetic system) of "Satanism," a perversion of the mind which Baudelaire's and Giraud's poetry almost seem to justify.

"Giraud has *seen* his beautiful poems," said Albert Mockel in an old criticism, "Fernand Séverin has *felt* his." In other words, Giraud is a Fleming; Séverin is a Walloon. To English readers, Séverin's exquisitely refined poetry must seem somewhat morbid in its feeling. He is another poet of an attitude: he is dowered with "the gift of youth"; he is cloistered in his virginity; he holds anæmic converse with his pale visions. Did ever any poet declare his love of studious solitude with a quainter pretentiousness (which nevertheless reads poetically true) than Séverin in his "Sovran State"?

"In nights impure moans one with fever stricken:
'Lord! let a maiden bring me, for I sicken,
Water and grapes, and quench my thirst with them.

"'Spring water! Fruits of a virgin vine! And let
Her fresh and virgin hands lie on the fret
Of my King's brow burnt by its diadem.'

"O pitiful crown upon a head so lowly!
Does the unquiet night allegiance show thee?
Thou King of beautiful lands that never were.

"'O stars among the trees! O waters pale!
Comes the expected dawn in opal veil?
Pity the tired and lonely sufferer:

"'And grant me, Lord, after the night out-drawn,
The sleep and boon of Thy forgiving dawn;
And let Thy chosen heart no longer bleed!'

"But answer makes the Lord in stern denial:
'Leave thou, for nobler verse, to pain and trial
Thy heart, the open book the angels read.'"

This is a proud conception, a poet-king doomed by God to virginity for poetry's sake; but Séverin has reached the opposite extreme of humility in his "The Lily of the Valley":

"I feel my heart for ever dying, bruised
By all the love it never will have used,
Dying in silence, and with angels by,
As simply as in cradles infants die,
Infants that have no speech.
O God-given heart,
Guarded by vigilant seraphim thou art!

Nothing shall soil thy natal raiment! Thou,
Rest thee content with no kiss on thy brow,
Save of maternal summer eves, and die
In thy desire and thy virginity.
Thy sacrifice has made thee shy and proud;
Thy life with very emptiness is bowed.
Made to be loved, loved thou shalt never be,
Though many maids would stretch their arms to thee,
As to the Prince who through their fancies rides.
Alas! and thou hast never known these brides;
To thee they come not when calm evening falls,
The pensive maids to whom thy longing calls;
And thou art dying of thy love unused,
Poor sterile heart, my heart for ever bruised!"

These attitudinal poems (there is every evidence that they are sincere) have a seductive charm; and they are rendered all the more fascinating by the antique Racinian language in which they trail their pathetic notes—as though some neurotic æsthete of our own days should write plaintive poems of modern nerves in the diction of Pope. And Séverin's nature poems, though ostensibly more mature, have the same note of shrinking averseness from the world. His nearest approach to a manly independence is crystallised in his poem "A Sage":

"He knows dreams never kept their promise yet.
Henceforth without desire, without regret,
He cons the page of sober tenderness
In which some poet, skilled in life's distress,
Breathed into olden, golden verse his sighs.
Sometimes he lifts his head, and feeds his eyes,
With all the wonderment that wise men know,
On fields, and clouds that over forests go,
And with their calmness sated in his thought.
He knows how dearly fair renown is bought:
He, too, in earlier days of stinging strength,
Sought that vain victory to find at length
Sadness at his desire's precipitous brink. . . .
Of what avail, he thought, to act and think,
When human joy holds all in one rapt look?
His mind at peace reads Nature like a book.
He smiles, remembering his youth's unrest,
And, though none know it, he is wholly blest."

Séverin's poems are collected in one volume: *Poèmes* (1908). But this book, unfortunately, does not include the first item in the poet's works, *Le Lys* (1888), which is a collector's prize.

Of the young Albertian Parnassians, Raymond Limbosch is at least one of the most promising. His *Faunesques* (1914) contains verse of distinction.

CHAPTER IX

EUGÈNE DEMOLDER

After Lemonnier and Eekhoud the most distinguished of the Flemish novelists is Eugène Demolder, of whom it might be said that he is the greatest painter in Belgian literature. He was for some time a *juge de paix*, and in his memoirs, *Sous la Robe*, he has given us interesting sketches of judicial and literary life in Belgium, with portraits which live and breathe of eminent colleagues—Picard, Vandervelde, and others.

Demolder's style has already been referred to: it consists from first to last in a most cunning transposition of pictures. Demolder's knowledge of painting must be immense; and he is able to reproduce in words not merely the outlines and colours of a picture, but the very soul of its meaning.

It is not difficult to find the models for the book that made him known, *Les Contes d'Yper-*

damme (1891), now published in one volume with another book, *Les Récits de Nazareth*, as *La Légende d'Yperdamme;* probably he derived inspiration from Maeterlinck's *Massacre of the Innocents* (which is a transposition of Breughel's picture of the same name) and Balzac's *Jésus-Christ en Flandre.* Yperdamme is some mythical village on the Flemish coast.

> "It is the curious city," says Eugène Gilbert, "that we see in the pictures of Breughel and Jan Steen, the city overlooked by its high cathedral whose delicate tracery sparkles with hoar-frost, the city girdled with moats over which, in hard frosts, red-faced skaters glide along in their warm clothing."

To this old-world Flemish city the events narrated in the Gospels are transferred in a series of grotesque and naïve anachronisms. Thus we have the miraculous draught of fishes, and the fishermen are Flemish, such fishermen as you may see to-day on the dunes about Ostend. There is the eve of the Nativity, with the farmers and fishermen coming from Furnes and Coxyde and Dixmude to Bethlehem, and they are "mounted on great horses without harness and without saddles, holding on

firmly" (as in pictures that everyone will remember) "to the manes of the animals, whose nostrils are steaming." At Bethlehem the church door is open, and all the stained glass windows are flowered with light; midnight mass is being celebrated. On the Flight to Egypt Joseph and Mary and the Child come to the dunes, and then the farms with the great red roofs fade from sight, and soon they come to the mouth of the Scheldt and to Flushing. It is at Yperdamme that the Massacre of the Innocents begins, and as soon as the murdering bands come into the streets of the city, the Black Virgin, the fishermen's miraculous tutelary saint, weeps in the cathedral. It is in the Campine that the prodigal son tends swine, with his heart bleeding to go back to his father's farm far away in fair Brabant. Such a medley of quaint distortion may seem absurd to those who do not know with what delight the Flemish people love to familiarise the Gospels. Flemish art and Flemish literature are full of things of this kind—keeping the gross realism of mediæval ignorance as in Pol de Mont's cycle of ballads "Of Jesus," or subtly modernised and the vehicle of a delicate symbolism as in Max

Elskamp's magic verses. There is only one charge to be made against *La Légende d'Yperdamme*: it postulates an attitude of *naïveté*, and the *naïveté* is strangled by the conscious and elaborate art of the narration. Demolder was emerging; but he is not yet sufficiently master of his method to hide the process of his labour. The same might be said of *Le Royaume authentique du grand Saint Nicolas*, ostensibly a Christmas tale for children.

In *La Route d'Émeraude*, surely one of the most brilliant novels of this century, he is past master of his manner. The book is an uninterrupted chain of pictures, the originals of which even a layman can recognise. The scene is in Holland in the seventeenth century. Kobus Barent, a miller's son in a quiet village on the Meuse near Dordrecht, is a born painter, and instinct teaches him to draw. The old miller does not approve of painting, but in the end he lets him go, and finds a master for him at Haarlem. This is Frantz Krul, a famous painter of portraits and genre pictures. Krul is apparently modelled on Jan Steen:

"Frantz Krul, with his jovial face barred by a brown moustache curled upwards at the ends, a ruddy face, large laughing eyes rolling under his forehead, over which a lock or so falls negligently, curved nose, sensual as a satyr's, arched mouth, gluttonous and bantering—the mouth of a man who loves to make a festivity of life—Frantz Krul, with his square shoulders and broad trunk, is handling the brush with agility in front of a huge canvas."

Lessing tried to prove that the painting of a picture in words is an impossibility, for, he thought, the mind can only take in one detail at a time, and the parts of the picture fade from the interior eye as the description proceeds. Lessing's reasoning was sound; but his conclusion would seem to be controverted by Demolder's transpositions. Possibly it is because one almost always recollects the canvas Demolder is transcribing. Who, for instance, can read the description of Frantz Krul's jovial face and burly figure without recalling Jan Steen's portrait of himself?

At Haarlem Kobus pursues his studies, as much in taverns as in the atelier, for Krul and his pupils are great drinkers, and lovers of rich viands, "and 'the rest,' as La Fontaine said, in a word of excessive shamefulness." (The joke is

from another tale of Demolder's, *L'Agonie d'Albion*, the hero of which is a Dutchman who hates the British, on account of the atrocities they committed in the Boer War.) Kobus falls in love with Krul's model Siska, a courtesan. She is a dark-skinned woman of Spanish parentage, which is the reason why she has not the short legs that the Haarlem women have. She had been found wrapped up in a brown rag, at the time of the war with Spain; and fishermen had reared her in the wind of the sea, and she had grown up like a goat among the sand-grasses. Her first lover was a sailor-boy who was killed by an English bullet at the mouth of the Thames. In the end she was carried off by an officer of the Dutch fleet; and after that she wore silk. Kobus shuts his eyes to her past, and goes with her to Amsterdam, where he experiences all the raptures of passion and all the agonies of jealousy and despair—for Siska must live, and live in luxury, and her lover earns little or nothing. But what is the intrigue to the superb evocation of Amsterdam, with its ramparts and gables and towers, the forest of masts in the port, its labyrinth of canals, its smells of turf and tar

and brine and spices, its herrings and smoked eels, its warehouses and taverns and brothels, its merchants and art-dealers! Siska is wonderful; here is a woman of bad character painted with such charm and freshness that one cannot be angry with her at her worst. But it is an auspicious day for Kobus when, deserting him, she sets sail for the Spanish Main in the company of a Spanish captain. Kobus, a sadder and a wiser man, returns to his old father and the old mill, and achieves fame as a painter while pursuing the nerve-reposing avocation of a miller. (This is in the tradition: Jan Steen was a brewer, Goyen sold tulips, Van de Cappelle was a dyer, and Joost van den Vondel wrote his poetry in the back parlour while his good wife sold stockings in the shop.)

And the hidden meaning? For Demolder was a symbolist, one of the primitives, as may be seen by the way he awakens sonorities on canvas. It is this: the fate of Kobus is that of his country. His childhood dreamed by the marshes, along the banks of rivers, under the willows. Then he fought his fight with the strange, dark woman, with Spain; and he was near being worsted. But when by the

strength of his nature he had overcome her, and recovered from the poison of her, he returned to his toil and his art, and became a rich burgher, and married Gésina, the rich bailiff's daughter, and had chocolate and peaches for breakfast every morning, and lived happy ever after! "That is the history of Holland."

La Route d'Émeraude (The Road to the Colours of Hope) is packed with adventure: it is a novel in the sense accepted by circulating libraries. The characters (Rembrandt is one—he is sold up in the course of the story) are fascinating in themselves; they are a gallery of living men and women. But what is the adventure, what is the gallery of men and women, to the gallery of paintings that illuminate the book? Paintings that are never hung in the wrong place, but which seem to be in the only place where they could possibly be. Here is a picture of a soldier with the light on his sword—is it not more out of place in a frame on a wall than seen as an episode in the daily life of a street?

"Farther on a soldier is walking. Planted in boots widened at the knees, he throws his cloak over his

shoulder to show the broad embroidered belt that squeezes his waist; a plume waves from his bonnet; his sword, the handle of which he grips, resembles, as soon as he leaves the shadow of the walls, a wand of fire."

Kobus has to choose between two schools of painting, that of jolly Frantz Krul and that of the man with the vague bitterness on his lips and the eyelids swollen with long labour. Rembrandt himself, in a conversation with Krul, contrasts the two styles:

"Verily it is a joy to conjure forth sanguine glories, flashes of rosy flesh. Your temperament drives you to it, moreover. Nudity for you must be triumphant and luxuriant. Your ideal is a Venus of firm outlines, born from the foam of the North Sea, and the patroness of sturdy fisher folk and sailors. And you love to immortalise drinkers in their cups, bedizened banquets, festival costumes with orange-tinted scarves. But don't you think, Krul, that an emaciated body hides a beauty just as great? It is a different beauty. I swear to you, when a beggar-woman, feverish and trembling, disrobes in my atelier, I experience an artistic emotion just as great as if she were Helen or Cleopatra. In the legend of her lean limbs I read the painful chronicle of her life, her resignation in humble tasks, the exhaustion come of her repeated maternity: I see all human sadness, which is immense, in her tired spine

and wasted frame. And tenderly I apply myself, with all the compassion that grips me, to interpret the sombre lassitude of her muscles, the traces of her clothing, of burdens she has carried, of diseases that leave marks of grief as tears do on the face. I render the pale, yellow tone of her skin, with the red spots that give it the desolate tints of autumn, and with the folds that trace lax curves in her flesh. And is not *that* life too? Is there nothing but joy in the world? By the side of one peony that blooms, is there not another that withers and sheds its petals? And does not a dying woman, amid the wrinkled agony of her colours, perform a function quite as deep as the harmony of things?"

Les Patins de la Reine de Hollande is a highly embroidered version, charged with symbolism, of the old legend of a girl brought up in complete ignorance of sex and from whom, when puberty comes, the facts of life cannot be hidden. Through all the bright colouring of the book runs like a black thread the idea that Death skates along the dizzy roads of life with Sex. Walburge, the orphaned daughter of the Comte de Rupelmonde, grows up in solitude in a castle on the Scheldt. She is guarded by a faithful serving-woman, Bertrane. They are sequestered from the world; temptation and danger are far away. But the

longing of awakened instinct comes to the girl, and now the world seems to beleaguer the castle. Walburge is assailed by vague desires. She sits at her casement watching the sea-gulls flying to the sea, which, Bertrane tells her, is as vast as the sky. She sees caravans of merchants passing, bearing perfumes of Araby, blades of Toledo, carpets from Smyrna, Cordovan leather. They are sunburnt under their silk turbans, and they caress their beards nonchalantly. She would fain see what they bear in their boxes; but she is too poor, Bertrane says. Walburge cannot be kept any longer in imprisonment, and one day, when the Scheldt is frozen hard, Bertrane brings her a pair of magic skates which the Queen of Holland used to wear when she was sixteen and went to see her lover. Bertrane has another pair for herself. Now Walburge sets forth to see Flanders.

Soon they are aware that a companion has joined them, and is skating along with them. It is Death. They come to a city, which is filled to overflowing with people making merry: it is carnival time. Death picks up a flute, and, dancing with a crimson galloon round his temples,

leads a troop of drunken revellers to the brothel. It is the Dance of Death. Death blows his green breath into the faces of the burghers, and they fall down and die: it is the Plague. Walburge skates on and on, to the Fairy Prince who is coming to meet her. She cannot stay, for she is Passion faring forth to the arms of Fate. But Bertrane is left behind, for she is Resignation, whom Passion *must* abandon. Walburge finds her Prince, and he tells her how he has braved the angry waves to seek her. "The wind," he says, "lifted round my bark the furious lace that it tears from the blue breast of the sea." He threw back his cloak, and bared his cuirass, which shone like a mirror. In it the young Countess of Flanders saw her fair hair reflected, and her eyes that were the colour of pale cornflowers, and her lips like fresh coral: so that it seemed to her that she was living in the very heart of her betrothed. And they go to his castle in the Land of Spring.

Le Jardinier de la Pompadour may well be flowered, for it is the book of the soul of a gardener, who loves Madame de Pompadour, and raises the flowers with which, and her own bloom,

she snares the heart of King Louis. Demolder wrote this novel at Essonnes in the province of Seine-et-Oise, and here he received an unexpected visit from Maeterlinck, to whom he had sent the first copy, and who had at once set out in his motor-car to point out that dahlias were mentioned among the flowers nurtured by Madame de Pompadour's gardener—a flower which, as everybody knows, had not been introduced into Europe at that period. The flower-pictures are delightful. Here is one, of tuberoses, a new flower, just arrived from Italy:

"Jasmin stopped in front of two tuberoses. White on their long green stalks and blushing, as though ashamed of the voluptuousness that breathed from their corollas, they offered themselves and their heady scent in the midst of a group of streaked bromelias that seemed smitten with the newcomers.

"'Caress them! They are nice to touch,' said M. Leturcq. . . .

"Jasmin resumed his journey, greatly marvelling. These tuberoses! It seemed to him as though he had been present at the deshabille of a princess on her wedding day, in one of those fairy tales he read in the evenings. And he was the bridegroom! He had touched the white flesh: his hand was still quite perfumed with it."

In the background the revolution smoulders; and there is a shadow over the gay scenes where the monarch sports himself with his minions and his dames.

Demolder's colouring is equally rich in his one book of travel, *L'Espagne en Auto*. His playlet, *La Mort aux Berceaux*, which places the Massacre of the Innocents in a mediæval castle, is at least curious.

At the lowest estimate, Demolder is a writer of great power. No other Belgian prose-writer has so brilliant a style. Perhaps there is not a more luminous colourist in any literature. All his works are flooded with light: they are illuminated texts. There is shadow here and there; but it is only such shadow as you might have in an orchard on a day of blazing sunshine.

He will probably never be translated into English, for in this country he would be considered obscene. He revels in sexual images, and (to English eyes) impossible situations. But he is never filthy. Eekhoud is distinctly filthy; but Demolder's obscenity is quite different. His is a laughing effrontery, a most delicate idealisation of sexual sensations.

For Eugène Demolder praise must not be stinted. If he has faults, they are venial. He disarms criticism by his debonair and unassuming manner, by his jovial unconcern (he is the Jan Steen of Belgian literature), as who should say: "All this, ladies and gentlemen, is for your pleasure, not your betterment. I leave preaching to the jaundiced, while myself I laugh and grow fat." Life is sad, he makes Rembrandt say: but the lowering clouds bring storms, and the storms pass, and the sun shines out again. Jan Steen may listen to Rembrandt, and love and reverence him, and yet remain Jan Steen, and delight in God's warm sunshine, and in good cheer, and "the rest" . . .

CHAPTER X

FLEMISH NOVELISTS AND DRAMATISTS

Georges Virrès is usually bracketed with Eekhoud as a novelist of the Campine. This region (but more to the east) is the invariable scene of his tales; and in the preface to *La Glèbe Héroïque* he proclaims that he is as devoted as Eekhoud is to these wastes of heather. But there is a great difference between the two: while Eekhoud is a rebel against all authority, including that of the Church, Georges Virrès is a pious Roman Catholic. This fundamental difference in ideas would be sufficient to prevent any great similarity in the works of the two authors; but they have the same love of the Campine peasants, and in the main details their conceptions of this primal race agree. Both are full of sympathy for the hard lot of those who spend their lives reclaiming the waste. Virrès, like Eekhoud, shows the Campine peasants in their violent fits, and there is much of death and

fatality in his work also; but to him the peasants of his race are in the first place mystics, as devoted to pilgrimages and religious processions as they are to *kermesses.*

The style of Virrès is somewhat sluggish, but his slow-moving periods lead to climaxes. He is above all an observer of character and customs. His *Hommes et Choses d'Aujourd'hui*, for instance, is pre-eminently a collection of folklore, full of little pictures illustrating quaint customs and beliefs, as for instance that in certain Limburg villages widows cling to the coffin and in the cemetery go through an old pantomime of quarrelling for it with the gravedigger.

Virrès began his series of Campine tales with *En Pleine Terre.* The book is warm with affection for the land and its people, but the style is too laboured and lyrical. The prose sings too much; the images are a medley. The same holds good of *La Bruyère Ardente,* in which the colours flame like sunsets over purple heaths. *L'Inconnu Tragique* tells of an epidemic which carries off the cattle of a district in the Campine. In their terror the peasants pray to God to avert

the plague, and it seems to be passing when, one evening, one of them loses control of himself and creates a scene in a tavern, with the result, as it seems to them, that the Lord hardens His heart and the wind of corruption blows over the land. In *La Glèbe Héroïque* we follow the fortunes of the peasants' rebellion which Eekhoud describes in *Les Fusillés de Malines*. In *Les Gens de Tiest* Virrès paints with great precision and delicate irony the little town of Tongres, where he has lived for over twenty years. Tiest and the neighbourhood appear again in *Le Cœur Timide* (1912), the hero of which is a young squire of irresolute character—a Belgian type taken from actual life, for many Belgians of good family are somnolent and dreamy. The melancholy of the book is relieved by the humorous episode of an electoral campaign, in which the socialists cut a sorry figure. Virrès, himself a squire, has in this novel drawn masterly portraits of the Belgian gentry.

Lemonnier, Eekhoud, Demolder, and Virrès belong to the older generation. Of the younger generation of French-writing Flemings, two stand out above the rest. These are Horace van Offel

and Franz Hellens, the first a native of Antwerp, the second a native of Ghent.

I have quoted Eekhoud's corrosive satire on the way the national army is regarded by the Belgians. This impression is amply confirmed by the military tales (*Une Armée de Pauvres; Les Enfermés; Le Retour aux Lumières*) of Horace van Offel, this other Antwerp rebel, who derives his knowledge from actual service in the army. He sees the degradation of the conscript; he paints the longing of sensitive men whom the law of the land forces into the position of pariahs. But the tales are not all of military life: Van Offel feels for the poor as well as for the conscript, and he is able to describe the lower classes with first-hand knowledge, for he has worked as a labourer at Lille. He has written excellent stories of low life in Antwerp (houses of ill-fame, bars and barmaids, etc.) The older generation produced very few effective plays; now in King Albert's reign there are signs of a coming harvest, and Van Offel is one of the most promising of the young dramatists. His plays *Les Intellectuels, L'Oiseau Mécanique, La Victoire, Le Loup, Une Nuit de Shakespeare*

are far better plays than the dramatic efforts of most of the veterans. *Une Nuit de Shakespeare* is one of the most interesting and original of the plays which have Shakespeare for a hero.

Franz Hellens is nothing if not original. He is a new writer in every sense of the term. *En Ville Morte* (1906), his first book, is a sombre evocation of Ghent. *Les Hors-le-Vent* (1909) is a strange book, Rembrandtesque, tortured—a collection of studies in Gothic prose. Hellens never makes any pretence of telling a story: he is a painter, but a painter who thinks, and paints his thought on the canvas. He does not paint things as the eye sees them, but as the mood sees them; and in his case the mood is determined not by the heart, but by the brain. In other words, he is a cerebral impressionist. He does not belong to the impressionist school: his impressionism is the inevitable product of his character, which is a primitive Flemish character, that is, a character made up of mysticism. But Hellens' mysticism, deprived of religion, appears in his first two books as a Pagan fatalism full of glow and colour. Hellens might be called a Maeterlinck in colours.

Perhaps the best thing in *Les Hors-le-Vent* is "Les Soirs de Gand," a chain of nocturnes giving the aspects of Ghent by night.

In "Salles d'Attente," another chapter of the book, Hellens symbolises the misery of life helpless between dingy reality (the city) and the mystery of the unknown (the bourne of the railway): he assembles a crowd of wretches—navvies, porters, strikers, soldiers—in the waiting-room of a railway station. Here the waifs of the city are waiting for the things that never come, the things that are lost in the mists of time, but forgetting their very longing in the comfort of a public fire. Among them is Valérie Droefkind, an old newsvendor. The poor old woman sits there dreaming, with the men spitting all round her (and what bitter thoughts they must have, she thinks, to spit like that without saying anything), and through her mind pass such memories as Villon rhymed into his ballad of "La belle Heaulmière."

In *Les Clartés Latentes* (1912) the colours are brighter: the light that was hidden in the darkness shines forth, and the world is beautiful. There is less vehemence and greater concentration in the

style of this book: whereas in *Les Hors-le-Vent* the images, troubled, grotesque, careered in a mad dance to exhaustion, in *Les Clartés Latentes* the description is slow, clear, calm. A sunny joy in life has taken the place of the angry fatalism of the earlier books. There is a certain depth of thought in Hellens, and there is a fund of ideas veiled (and sometimes hidden from the searcher) in the symbolism of *Les Clartés Latentes.* But (as is usually the case with Flemish writers) it is the picture rather than the idea which remains in the memory.

Of another Albertian writer, Ferdinand Crommelynck, I do not know whether he is a Fleming or a Walloon, but the surname appears Flemish. His father was a famous actor. Crommelynck is one of those young men who write something or other and are at once hailed as geniuses; everything that they write afterwards is discussed in all its bearings and is famous in the literary cafés (a feature of Brussels as of Paris) before it is published. Crommelynck's much-praised poem *La Vengeance de Papillons*[1] is a throw-back, in

[1] *Le Masque*, Oct.–Nov. 1910.

Mockel's rhythms, to the manner of the symbolist Primitives; it is a very melodious jumble of Swinburnian colours and images from which no clear sense emerges, though it seems to be an elaboration of the commonplace from Schopenhauer that when a flower blooms it is withering. It is in the drama that Crommelynck has done his best work. Beside an airy trifle, *Nous n'irons plus au bois*, he has written three remarkable plays, *Le Sculpteur de Masques*, *Le Chemin des Conquêtes*, and *Le Marchand de Regrets*. All the plays except the last are in verse. They would be masterpieces if it were not for a few slips or inconsistencies: for instance, in *Le Marchand de Regrets* Anne-Marie nestles close to the miller, who is quite white with flour, and the flour does not come off on to her clothes. Crommelynck's style bears some relation to the earlier style of Franz Hellens: it is a style intensely black in its lines, a Gothic style, that is, imposing, and wreathed with grotesque and vivid ornamentation. The atmosphere is saturated with horror, much as in the murder scenes of Maeterlinck's *La Princesse Maleine*—only, Crommelynck's horror grips, while Maeter-

linck's (in the play in question) never quite gets away from the melodramatic. Crommelynck's dramas have the great virtue of conciseness: there is not a word too much, and every word tells.

In Belgium itself there is a consensus of opinion that the most important Belgian dramatist is Gustave van Zype. His dramas, as pessimistic and realistic as those of Ibsen, deal with social problems; they betray a rather conservative bias. Van Zype is a conscientious and interesting writer, although (let us say the worst) he is a trifle stodgy. His most important dramas are: *Le Patrimoine*, *Tes Père-et-Mère*, *La Souveraine*, *Les Étapes*, *Le Gouffre*, *Les Liens*. The last play created a sensation when it was produced at Brussels in 1912. The problem is the heredity of disease. Grandal is a scholar whose father and grandfather were drunkards and maniacs. He himself has hitherto escaped without scathe, but after an honourable life of labour, and while he is still absorbed in studies which will benefit mankind, he feels the beginnings of mental disease. At this stage his son falls in love with a girl who is herself neurotic and the last of her race. The old scholar tries

to prevent the marriage, but his wife, determined that her son shall not be robbed of his happiness, persuades Grandal that he is not the father of her son. This is more than his reason can bear. The drama is not unfit to be ranked with Strindberg's *The Father*. Van Zype's stories are preoccupied with the same social problems as his dramas. *La Révélation*, for instance, is an anti-Malthusian novel. A young married couple agree to have no children, but after a few years there is an accident, and the baby is the revelation — of happiness.

The popular success which has been persistently denied to Van Zype's terribly earnest dramas was achieved by Paul Spaak's *Kaatje*. On its first production it ran for fifty nights—a stupendous run in Belgium (Van Zype's *Les Liens* lasted fifteen nights, and that was considered a gratifying success). Spaak's other dramas are *À Damme en Flandre*; *Baldus et Josina*; *Camille*.

CHAPTER XI

WALLOON NOVELISTS AND DRAMATISTS

How unsatisfactory the term "Belgian" is when applied to literature is seen at once when one compares the Flemish novelists with their fellow-craftsmen in the Walloon districts. In characterising the Flemish novelist, it is not the substance of the story, nor the handling of the plot, nor the psychology that needs weighing, it is the quality of the painting. This is not the case with the Walloon novelists (or rather *conteurs*, for the short story is the rule, and the novels are usually short stories lengthened). With them, it is the sentiment and the idea which must be considered. "Sentiment" is the correct word; "emotion" *might* mean too much, and "feeling" would be too strong a term. There is plenty of feeling in the Flemish novelists: tender feeling in Lemonnier, Demolder, and Virrès, fierce feeling in Eekhoud and Horace van Offel. The Walloon writers are too refined and cerebral

for feeling in this extreme sense: if they have feeling, it is a gentle emotion, and they play with it, analyse it, consider it in the light of memory, mock at it with gentle irony. And they never lose sight of the idea, which is the base of the work. Their symbolism rolls itself round an idea and invites interpretation, whereas Flemish symbolism veils a mystery from profane eyes. But the Walloons do not follow up a series of ideas till they form a logical chain, a philosophical entity. There is nothing in any Walloon tale-writer like the conception of life which Lemonnier's warmth of feeling engendered. The ideas which preoccupy the Walloon writers are detached and evanescent. But the ideas are there, in each separate tale, bright and glancing. Louis Delattre, in his fascinating *Le Pays Wallon*, has illuminated the Walloon character by a fine image. At the end of every Walloon village, he says, there is a quarry, and to his mind the stone-cutters typify the qualities of his race, their pleasure in bringing hidden things to the light of day, in striking the white light of the idea from the hard stone.

Louis Delattre, perhaps the most soberly bril-

liant of the Walloon *conteurs*, began, in the very days when the pretentious prose of the symbolists was the fashion, with recollections of childhood narrated in a perfectly simple style. These tales are somewhat intangible, but marked by a subtle and delicate charm. His later work, *La Loi de Péché*, *Le Parfum des Buis*, is more poignant. Georges Rency has sketched Delattre's evolution:

"A chalky road in Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse, an orchard in blossom, a cottage on a hill, children playing at marbles in the Church porch, an old woman smiling at the westering sun. . . . A whole host of images, with exquisite godsends of feeling, this is Delattre in his *Contes de mon Village*, *Les Miroirs de Jeunesse*, *Une Rose à la Bouche*. The tales of these three collections are born of the sap of instinct. The form may be somewhat hazy, but there is no trace in them of effort. Everything gushes forth from its source in the very life of the writer. He draws with full hands from his heart, which is overflowing with emotion and fragrance and delicate memories: and it is as though he had plunged his hands into a wicker basket full of green vegetables and field flowers and ripe fruit. The confident optimism of these first stories is in some sort unconscious, involuntary. You would say that Delattre, when he wrote them, had no knowledge of pain and wretchedness. He is happy and he thinks that everybody is happy. His conception of the world is like that of a child at play,

who imagines that playing is the great affair in life. But the years pass. A crisis comes in this existence, a moral crisis concerning which we shall never know anything, for Delattre is one of those authors who fight shy of personal confession. For some years there is silence, complete silence: it seems as though the writer were exhausted. Suddenly he reappears, begins to publish again. In a few years he issues fifteen volumes, about two a year. . . . Now, you feel, Delattre knows pain and wretchedness; but he has weighed tears and smiles, and it is the latter which are heavier in the scales. Yes, suffering there is in existence, great suffering, but, when all is said and done, life is better than non-existence, and suffering, however acute, is preferable to stagnation and weariness." [1]

Delattre is never exciting. Adventure would seem trivial to this intelligent writer, who is an interpreter of life, a poet of the heart, not a spinner of yarns. The substance of *La Loi de Péché*, which is a whole novel, not a tale, is merely this: two cousins love each other, but the boy is timid, and the girl is won by another man, whereupon the boy returns to his native village to live on his memories. One of the stories of *Le Parfum des Buis* is typical of that love of the bizarre which

[1] *La Vie Intellectuelle*, Jan. 1912.

sometimes leads Walloon writers astray: a bull has killed the only son of a farmer, his mother goes out of her mind, and her madness takes a curious form: she has the beast led before her every day, so that she can take hold of its head and embrace it. This is not ridiculous in Delattre's tale.

Georges Garnir situated the scene of his first stories (*Contes à Marjolaine*, *Les Charneux*, *La Ferme aux Grives*) in the Ardennes, round about Liége. These tales have the sentimentality and the simple charm of Delattre's early work. Later, Garnir settled in Brussels, and wrote tales (*À la Boule Plate*, *Le Conservateur de la Tour Noire*) in which he encroached on Léopold Courouble's province, and caricatured the Philistines of the capital.

Hubert Krains began with fantastic tales of horror (*Histoires Lunatiques; Les Bons Parents*), which read as though his ambition was to be the Belgian E. T. A. Hoffmann. In "Croquis Nocturne," for instance, he describes a village hemmed in with poplars in a hot night in August, an owl peering from a barn, insects flitting against the

trees, while a woman slips out of a turreted castle and glides, frightened by the rustling of her black dress, through the park. It is the unexpectedness of the ending which produces the thrill:

"In front of her the road, narrower and narrower, streaks like a thin grey ribbon the mass of shadow heaped between the arched branches of two parallel hedges. With one hand she nervously presses her breast as if to calm the palpitations of her heart, and her eyes, uneasy and feverish, search the darkness where vague things seem to wave silently to and fro.

"By and bye she can make out, on the right, emerging from the thistles and brambles that choke the ditch, a shapeless stone cross.

"Instinctively, the woman rushes forward: her feet do not seem to touch the earth, her body sways stiffly like a ghost, and her eyes, haggard and staring, express a suffering more than human. Heavily she sinks down into the brambles, which tear her dress but give way, and, with her breasts crushed against the cold stone of the cross, on which the moss has hung its silky fringes, with writhing arms, with a frame shaken by the agony of an infinite sorrow, with her head stretched upwards to the impassible stars, she calls desperately for the lover who for her sake has been slain."

Krains is often most successful in creating an atmosphere of supreme horror, as in the story of

the old beggar who smashes a statue of Christ and finds money hidden inside it, only to go mad with remorse. His more mature work (*Amours Rustiques*, *Le Pain Noir*) is marked by a minute naturalism and a harrowing pessimism. He extracts the maximum of suffering from his subject. "Not content with observing in order to understand," says Maurice Gauchez, "he dissects in order to explain." He would be the most cruel and corrosive of Belgian authors if he did not identify himself with the sufferings of his characters, mostly broken-down people who are sick to death with despair; but he is not a realist standing outside the world he creates—he is in it, heart and soul; and his tenderness for his creatures, his all-embracing charity, lift him above sordidness.

Maurice des Ombiaux is the most prolific as he is the gayest of the Walloon writers. He would be flattered if he were called the most Walloon of the Walloons; for he is the apostle of the Walloon country, in which he has situated practically all his work. "The King of Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse" someone has called him. Le-

monnier could not endure the idea of being "a cow grazing its patch of grass round its stake." This is just what des Ombiaux takes a pride in being. He is the *régionaliste à outrance.* "You cannot hope to be a Lamartine," he says to the young Belgian writers, who in recent years have broken away from the tradition of the *milieu*, "you can only be a Belgian Lamartine." Of set purpose he has concentrated his studies on the history, the architecture, the folklore, the scenery of his native Hainault, and he has poured his specialised knowledge (sometimes with monotonous insistence) into the mould of his tales. But whatever mistakes his doctrine may have led him into, no one could deny the immense variety of his books: *Contes d'entre Sambre et Meuse*, *Mes Tonnelles*, *Têtes de Houille*, *Mihien d'Avène*, *Le Joyau de la Mitre*, *La Maison d'Or*, *Nos Rustres*, *Guidon d'Anderlecht*, *Le Maugré*, *Contes d'Avant l'Amour*, *Les Manches de Lustrine*, *Petit Traité de Havane*, etc. Some of his work is pronouncedly Rabelaisian, but is too good-natured to be offensive. He has the faculty of combining comedy with tragedy; as in *Mihien d'Avène*, the story of an idiot who falls

in love and murders his rival. *Le Maugré* is perhaps the novel in which he has gone farthest astray. It is all a study of local custom. It would appear that in the district in question the farmers deny their landlord the right of increasing their rent, and still more that of evicting them. If a landlord tries to exercise his legal rights, he can find no tenant in the locality to replace the farmer he has evicted; and if he imports one from another district, the immigrant's cattle are maimed, and he and his family are murdered. The conditions are obviously similar to those which obtained in Ireland not long ago. Des Ombiaux had a plenitude of excellent material to work in; but his obsession of elucidating local custom leads him into the error of tracing this particular tradition to the Middle Ages. The movement of the story is excellent: we are hurried from event to event. The characterisation is good: here are Walloon peasants, good and bad, as they live and breathe. And yet—it is a monotonous book, and it disproves the whole theory of excessive regionalism. It proves that an inventory of customs, however accelerated by action, does not make a

novel. But, in justice to des Ombiaux, it must be pointed out that *Le Maugré* is rather an experiment in the direction of unrelieved tragedy, whereas the real des Ombiaux is a jolly writer who is scarcely tinged with the prevailing melancholy of the Walloon writers. There is another thing in which he differs from the rest of his Walloon compeers: he is a colourist. For instance, he strings a series of pictures together in Demolder's manner in *Guidon d'Anderlecht*, an essay in profane hagiography (the novel cheerily proposes to relate the career of St. Guidon, one of the most popular saints of Brabant, and the very date leaps forward four hundred years). But—a vital point —this rather careless writer (for at his best he is a teeming improviser) splashes the colours about in a way that Demolder would never dream of doing; he makes us see the colours, not the picture. Describing the fair at Ypres, for instance, he says:

"In the streets and the alleys the crowd swarmed and swirled red, green, orange, white, violet, purple, with blue shadows, while afar the blonde verdure of Flanders laughed in the flat fields, under an indigo sky graced

with big white clouds as round as balls, like snowy mountains."

Anyone who has seen *Le Mariage de Mademoiselle Beulemans* knows that there is such a thing as Belgian humour. But it is very, very rare. Belgian authors take themselves so seriously. . . . According to Eugène Gilbert, it was Léopold Courouble who discovered Belgian humour; and Courouble is certainly the accredited Belgian humorist. The book which first showed the Belgians that a national humour was possible is *La Famille Kaekebroeck*. Courouble makes his good burghers of Brussels speak that dialect of the French language which is known as "le parler belge." Other books of his are: *Mes Pandectes; Profils Blancs et Frimousses Noires; Images d'Outremer; Pauline Platbrod; Les Noces d'Or*; *Le Mariage d'Hermance*. In *La Maison Espagnole*, with its pictures of old Brussels life, he has given us his autobiography.

Fernand Wicheler and Franz Fonson would hardly have written their famous comedy, *Le Mariage de Mademoiselle Beulemans*, if *La Famille Kaekebroeck* had not showed them the way. Their

comedy is notoriously the most successful, financially, of all Belgian plays, and its characters have become proverbial, but it is doubtful whether any of the plays of these authors belong to literature.

Henri Maubel in his tales (*Dans l'Île*, *Âmes de Couleur*) and plays (*Étude de Jeune Fille*, *Les Racines*, *L'Eau et le Vin*) studies the soul of girls on the verge of womanhood. He is a philosophic writer of the greatest refinement. He works somewhat by Maeterlinck's gospel of silence: he listens to the manifestations of the soul. Like his own Abbé Jacquelin he seeks "to bring our own mystery home to us." Dreams may reveal it:

> "Dream," he says, "reality . . . these are words; the dream is real, or else we should have to deny the brain where it is born. Dream is the light of the flames that consume us. It is the blossoming of our desires when they have been purified in the spirit, and it only appears so strange and is only so powerful because it reflects desires that the body does not seize."

Henri Maubel is the husband of Blanche Rousseau, who has also in her dream-pictures analysed the soul of young girls. Her volume of

short stories, *Le Rabaga*, is one of the most notable books of recent years. An analysis of one of her tales, "Grande Mademoiselle Fanny," will show how cunningly she uses the atmosphere of fairy tales to reveal feminine character. Angèle and Phlip are two little ragamuffins. Angèle has a doll whose name is Grande Mademoiselle Fanny. "Shall we get married soon?" Phlip asks one day. "I am quite willing, if big Miss Fanny will agree," Angèle replies. They go to ask Miss Fanny, but no answer can be got from the doll. "She says you mustn't kiss me any more," Angèle interprets the doll's silence. "She says we must wait. She says we can get married when you bring me a money-box with some money in." Phlip, nothing daunted, hires himself to a farmer, and tends sheep for a long, long time, till he has the money. He takes what he has earned to Angèle, and she puts the money in Miss Fanny's pocket. "When shall we get married?" asks Phlip. "Didn't I tell you?" answers the little girl, "she wants a red petticoat. She wants the red petticoat in Denis's shop-window. Be quick and go and buy it!" "How can I," asks Phlip,

"when I haven't got my money?" "She says she *must* have it," insists Angèle. Phlip steals it, and is put in prison. But all the time he thinks that Angèle is waiting for him, and that when he gets back home they will be married. When he is released, he walks a day and a night, and a day again. And he arrives at the village. It is an evening in May. He hides himself till the moon comes out. Then he goes to the farm and throws a handful of sand at the attic window. Angèle opens the window, and talks to him. She is sorry he has had to eat dry bread. As for her, she has had roast goose with chestnuts, and fig jam. . . . She knows what he has come for, but, she tells him, Miss Fanny has had another idea. . . . now she wants the Blue Bird. Phlip sets out to find it, crosses the ocean, and goes to where the niggers and the Chinese live. As the years pass, Angèle sits at her window, and sometimes at night she makes a sign to someone passing in the shadow. Then a step is heard on the staircase and some soldier or other pushes her door open. He brings cakes and wine. But one evening somebody came to the door when she was not

expecting anyone. He knocked twice. Angèle opened the door . . . and there stood Phlip. He had grown very tall, and he was sunburnt. He was dressed as a sailor, and a bird was perched on his fist. He did not wait for her to invite him to come in. "Here I am," he said, "and here's the bird." Angèle saw that it was the Blue Bird. He tells her his experiences in strange lands, and leaves her, saying he will come back the day after and then they can get married. The morning after he returns to the room, and finds her waiting in her wedding dress. She has been stitching all night. On her head she has a straw hat. And on the straw hat something blue is stirring. It is the Blue Bird, stitched alive on to the straw hat. Its wing is still beating a little. . . .

Charles Delchevalerie is one of the few survivors yet writing of the group who wrote for *La Wallonie* and *Floréal*. Journalism has left him little time for literature, but the "landscape studies" of his *Décors* (1895), his short story *La Maison des Roses Tremières* (1898), and *Images Fraternelles* (1914), a collection of vivid impressions splendidly illustrated by Auguste Donnay,

keep his name before the public. As a descriptive writer, Delchevalerie is in the front rank. One of his fellow-workers in the days of *La Wallonie* was Célestin Demblon, who wrote *Contes Mélancoliques* and *Nouveaux Contes Mélancoliques*. Since then he has devoted himself (like Georges Eekhoud) to Shakespearean criticism, and (like Maeterlinck) he has translated *Macbeth*.

Not all the Walloon writers are regionalists or philosophers. The best are, decidedly. But there is a sprinkling of romanticists—not new-romanticists, in the Viennese sense, but romanticists of the good old school of Victor Hugo. There are, then, historical novels in Belgian literature. The most famous is *La Cité Ardente*, in which Henry Carton de Wiart, the present Minister of Justice, unrolls the epic of the city of Liége. Opinions differ as to the merit of the book, as of *Les Vertus Bourgeoises*, another historical novel of Carton de Wiart's; but it is at all events certain that the noblest of Belgian cities deserves a greater epic than Henry Carton de Wiart can write, although he got the quinquennial prize for his production.

Another Belgian writer who owes much of his success to official influence is Henri Davignon, whose father is the present Minister for Foreign Affairs. His drama *La Querelle* was played in 1914 in the presence of the King and the Queen and six Cabinet Ministers (a record for "the Belgian theatre"). The play is also remarkable linguistically, as Léopold Rosy pointed out in *Le Thyrse*, for (in the interests of local colour—it is, specifically, a "Belgian" play) it is written in three languages — French, Walloon, and Beulemans. Henri Davignon is nothing if not patriotic. He would reconcile the two warring races of his country, he would fuse Fleming and Walloon. How it can be done he shows in his much-discussed novel *Un Belge* (1913): let orthodox Flanders save the soul of free-thinking Wallonia, and all will be well. The two races must intermarry, but there must be an end of all this Walloon cynicism. This tendencious spirit guides the intrigue of Davignon's other novels (*L'Ardennaise*, *Le Prix de la Vie*, *Le Courage d'Aimer* are readable); and this young aristocrat (personally very charming, by all accounts) takes care that the

Whig dogs and especially the blear-eyed socialists get the worst of it. He has a sense of landscape; and anyone wishing to visit the Ardennes might find suggestions in his novels for a profitable itinerary.

Belgium lost, in 1912, a promising writer in François Charles Morisseaux. He resigned a commission in the army to devote himself to literature, was director of the excellent Brussels review *Le Thyrse* from 1905 to 1908, he wrote numerous novels, tales, and plays, and he was barely thirty when he died. As a member, for some time, of the staff of *L'Étoile Belge*, he rejuvenated that family journal's literary columns. His plays, for all the lively wit he expended in them, are hardly likely to survive; his novels *À Travers le Vitrail*, *La Blessure et l'Amour*, *Histoire Remarquable d'Anselme Ledoux*, and his volume of short stories *Bobine et Casimir* are saved by their delicate irony.

Paul André is, like Henri Davignon, an author who treats modern problems with an orthodox bias. In *Delphine Fousseret* he hit upon an idea—the love-sick woman of forty—which has been more successfully handled by Karin Michaelis. It is,

however, rather as a regionalist writer, a devotee of the Walloon country, that he has achieved distinction (*Le Prestige*, *L'Impossible Liberté*). His *Chers Petits Anges* are studies of children; his *Contes de la Boîte* turn his recollections of the army to account.

A sound critic of other men's work, a great quarreller who never shows temper, even when the hosts of the mighty move up against him (as when recently he had the temerity to defend Maeterlinck against the slashing onslaught of Louis Dumont-Wilden), Georges Rency has written admirable novels and tales (*Madeleine*, *L'Aïeule*, *Contes de la Hulotte*, *Frissons de Vie*). Franz Mahutte, one of the old guard of *La Jeune Belgique*, is caustic and sometimes sordid in his stories *Gens de Province*, *Sans Horizon*, *Feuilles au Vent*. Hubert Stiernet is known for his *Histoires Hantées*, and *Haute Plaine*.

To return to the historical novel, there is a Belgian Pierre Louys. Count Albert du Bois has produced something akin to the French writer's *Aphrodite* in his novels of ancient Greek life *Amours Antiques* (the second edition was rebap-

tized *L'Athénienne*) and *Leuconoé*. These are novels for adults. The count is a rich amateur who allows himself the luxury of writing, beside his astonishing novels, plays in Alexandrines, something like Racine's. If the Count is the Belgian Pierre Louys, Maurice de Waleffe must, by virtue of his ancient Egyptian novel *Le Peplôs Vert*, be called the Belgian Georg Ebers. To complete the trio, François Léonard (who has written verse, plays, and criticism) must be called the Belgian Wells: his *Le Triomphe de l'Homme* is a terrific scientific vision of the future; in the last chapter, the Earth goes wrong, waggles about, makes a rush for Vega . . . and bursts.

Prosper Henri Devos made a name by his *Monna Lisa*, a novel of Bohemian life in Brussels: two artists are rivals for the possession of a woman. Devos leads a campaign against the regionalist fashion, and he has dared to break a lance with Maurice des Ombiaux. Auguste Rouvez, himself an official in the Ministry of Science and Art, has satirised the bureaucracy of the capital (as des Ombiaux did in *Les Manches de Lustrine*) in his novel *Le Capitole*.

Henri Liebrecht collaborated with Morisseaux in writing plays (*Miss Lili*, *L'Effrénée*). Plays of his own are: *L'Autre Moyen*, *L'École des Valets*, *La Main Gauche*, *L'Impromptu Persan*, *Gil Blas chez Monseigneur*. His drama *Enfant des Flandres* is an adaptation of De Coster's *Légende d'Ulenspiegel*. Liebrecht is greatly in evidence in Brussels as a combative critic, very busy in the interests of "the Belgian Theatre," with which his own interests are involved. He has compiled a *Histoire de la Littérature Belge d'Expression Française* (Brussels, 1913); a *livre commandé*, but useful.

Sylvain Bonmariage (English on his mother's side) is the *enfant terrible* of Belgian literature. He is attacked to right and left, as an impudent young coxcomb, as a *farceur*, as a *sauteur*, as a prodigy. But Albert Giraud protects him. His poems (*Poèmes*, 1909) cannot be taken quite seriously, though they are prefaced by Albert Giraud, who describes his favourite as having "lips Britannically shaved" and as "joining the most English phlegm to the most French petulance." The plays of this Belgian Alcibiades (*Le*

Pelican, Tant va la Cruche à l'Eau, L'Automne) have been acted at Paris. Of his recent novel *Les Caprices du Maître* a Parisian writer who is beyond suspicion of partiality, Eugène Montfort, has distinctly said (*Les Marges*, February 1914) that it is pleasant and witty; and the same may be maintained of Bonmariage's other tales (*L'Eau qui dort, Les Aventures Merveilleuses de l'Abbé de Lassus, Attitudes, Bobette petite Sœur de la Lune*.

A writer of meagre output but considerable talent is Ferdinand Bouché. His long novel *Les Mourlon*, which describes the tragic rivalry of two old farmers for the love of a buxom wench who turns out to be the daughter of one of them (begotten on a beggar-woman in a barn), has had the good fortune to be translated into Flemish by Stijn Streuvels, which gives it a a second (and probably more robust) life. *Les Mourlon* admirably reproduces the life on a farm in Hainault, Bouché's native province. His best work, however, is contained in *Chrysalides*, a collection of short stories some of which are nothing less than masterpieces.

Beyond all doubt, of the younger generation of Walloon writers it is Edmond Glesener from whom the most is to be hoped. His novel *Le Cœur de François Remy* is by some critics considered to be the best which has appeared in recent years. It is a psychological novel of great intensity, describing the character of a neurasthenic weakling—a modern type. The book is painful, perhaps cruel. In Glesener's next novels, *Monsieur Honoré* and its sequel *Le Citoyen Colette*, the cruelty is lightened by irony. The two novels together (their secondary title is *Chronicle of a Little Country*) give us a sorry picture of Belgium, but Glesener has obviously a poor opinion of his native country. "To Belgians," he says, "the finest idea in the world was never worth a crown piece." "In a country of illiterates," he says again in *Le Citoyen Colette*, "it is natural that fools should succeed." The protagonist of the two novels, Honoré Colette, is a fool, and he succeeds. He has good looks, and he has the success of Maupassant's Bel Ami from the moment when, a butcher employed at the Halles aux Viandes at Liége, he takes the first step upwards by marrying

a rich widow. He is now a *rentier;* and has plenty of spare time for philandering. He throws one of his rivals into the Meuse, fishes him out again, and is decorated for heroism. Another step. . . . He enters the City Guard, seduces his chief's wife, is invited to a Court ball. He continues to mount, till he is elected a socialist member of Parliament. Here ends the first novel, which took Glesener seven years to write. In *Le Citoyen Colette* we witness the decline and fall of the hero, who ends his days in wretchedness, deserted by his followers. But the moral effect of his fall is lacking—one humbug goes, other humbugs take his place. As ever in Belgium, Glesener would have us believe. Evidently the satire must be taken with a grain of salt. But it has its justification, as any-one who has the least acquaintance with Belgian life must know. Glesener has confessed that in writing the Colette novels he always had *Gil Blas* and *Le Rouge et le Noir* by him. Colette is an adventurer, like the heroes of Le Sage's and Stendhal's novels. But here the resemblance ends. Colette is only the hero in the sense that the novels are written round his career. In himself

he is a mean and miserable personage. He is only interesting as a type. This, perhaps, according to the orthodox criteria of criticism, is the defect of the books. But Glesener did not aim at enlisting his readers' sympathies for Colette. His idea was to criticise Belgium, and this he does, exhibiting pictures of each successive stage of society as Colette ascends the ladder, giving us a synopsis of Belgian life. And by his own showing all is not bad in his "little country." In the hearts of simple people he finds goodness; in children he finds a charm which is better than all the glitter of high life.

If, as is expected, a new Belgium arises after the war from the ruins of the old, a Belgium which can no longer be charged with contempt of intellect, Glesener's *Chronicle of a Little Country* will perhaps assume the character of a historical record by which the new régime will judge the old.

CHAPTER XII

NOVELISTS IN FLEMISH

In Camille Lemonnier's *Le Vent dans les Moulins* there is a character, Piet Baezen, who is the son of a baker and a baker himself.

"Every morning," says the tale, "Piet put his loaves in the oven and then out of the town he went, walking straight in front of him, away by the tiny farms with their green shutters. That was the only way he had ever had of writing his tales about the poor. Nobody before him had expressed such humble and brotherly things. Baezen was the only person who never seemed to imagine that his books were better even than his bread. He wrote his books just as he kneaded his dough, with the same silent and gentle soul. . . . They were so sad and gentle, these tales of poor folks, that they almost made you want to suffer yourself, to have your nose nipped by the frost while your two hands were as far down in your pockets as they would go. . . ."

Piet Baezen can be no other than Stijn Streuvels. And no wonder that Lemonnier made

him a part of his book, for he had set himself the task of singing the soul of Flanders, and the soul of Flanders is in Stijn Streuvels. When all is said and done, *he* is the true Fleming; and all the others, whether they write in French or Flemish, cannot entirely get away from French culture.

Stijn Streuvels's real name is Frank Lateur, and he is the nephew of Guido Gezelle. His father, after marrying Gezelle's sister, set up as a baker at Heule, near Courtrai, and here Frank was born in 1872. When he was about twelve years old, the family removed to Avelghem, where the future novelist grew up, and received such schooling as could be had. As soon as his parents allowed him, he stopped away from school. He was sent to Bruges to learn baking, and when his father died he took over the shop. He soon acquired a great local reputation as a confectioner; the peasants from miles round came to him for their fancy cakes. At four or five o'clock in the morning he was up and working; and in the pauses during the baking he read and read, like David Livingstone at the loom. His thirst for reading

was unquenchable; he taught himself French, German, English, and Russian, and spent every available penny on books. He is said to have read every number of the *Reclambibliothek.* To save money for books, he never spent a penny on amusements, never crossed the threshold of a tavern (something incredible in a Flemish village!). From his eighteenth to his twenty-eighth year he lived like a monk.

In 1895—he was twenty-five at the time—he began to contribute short stories to the papers. Soon he was discovered by Karel van de Woestijne, who with Cyriel Buysse and other writers had just founded *Van Nu en Straks*, a review which was planned to break new ground. After some correspondence Streuvels met van de Woestijne in Ghent, and henceforward he contributed regularly to the new review. His first book, *Lenteleven* (The Life of Spring) was denounced as obscene by the Roman Catholic journal *Belfort.* There was no justification whatever for the attack, but the article was sent to the parish priest of Avelghem, with the result that Stijn Streuvels was subjected to much local persecution. How-

ever, the Church was powerless to injure him in the larger world of literature; and soon Streuvels was able to join with other writers in launching another review with modern ideals, *Vlaanderen*.

He continued to work in his bakery. He would be busy till noon; and in the afternoons he would go for long walks in the neighbouring villages (like Piet Baezen). At about five o'clock he would return, shut himself up in his cell, and work at his tales. He had nothing to do with selling what he baked; the shop was attended to by the other members of the household. Gradually, in spite of his excellent cakes, he came to have the reputation of being mad, or what is worse, a heathen heretic. Here was a man who avoided the taverns, and went for walks, with no apparent object, every afternoon. And when Streuvels began to go for his walks in the nighttime, there could no longer be any doubt. . . . At last, however, he showed some promise of recovering his senses. He was going to get married. But as it turned out his marriage provided the "coffee-wives" with the greatest scandal of all—he came to church in a jacket and a soft felt hat. . . .

A short time before his marriage his mother had inherited a few thousand francs, and Stijn Streuvels himself was now earning a decent income by his writing, so they sold the shop and the goodwill, and Streuvels had a villa built at Ingoyghem, a little village at a considerable distance from any railway, but in a lovely district. "His life here is very lonely," says André de Ridder in his book on the novelist. "He does not travel, he does not receive callers, he makes no friends; he does not chat with anyone in the village. All the families in the neighbourhood would, of course, be only too glad to have him at their parties and dinners, but he declines all invitations."

Streuvels's work may be divided into three periods, that in which he records the impressions of his early youth at Heule, that for which his life at Avelghem provides the material, and that which centres round Ingoyghem. The scenes of his stories, however, are not localised by name; it is interior evidence which gives the indication. The realism of the first and second periods is sometimes overshadowed by a vague pessimism;

in the third period the happy conditions of the novelist's own rural life prevail. But everywhere there is sunshine and shadow; more sunshine towards the end. His works are: *Lenteleven* (1899); *Zomerland* (1900); *Zonnetij* (1900); *Doodendans* (1901); *Langs de Wegen* (1903); *Dagen* (1903); *Minnehandel* (1904); *Dorpsgeheimen* (1904); *Openlucht* (1905); *Stille Avonden* (1905); *Het Uitzicht der Dingen* (1906); *De Vlasschaard* (1907). Of these, *Langs de Wegen* and *Minnehandel* are novels—at least they appear to be so, though the author has not actually called them "novels." In any case, Streuvels (like so many of the Walloon *conteurs*) is unable to write anything but short stories, and what appear to be intended as novels are really collections of independent impressions.

Even in his short stories Streuvels ignores the exigencies of construction. "De Oogst" (The Harvest), for instance, one of the tales in *Zonnetij*, is really a couple of tales. If one detaches the sentimental outlines, the first part is the love-story of Rik and Lida; but when Rik dies of sunstroke the tale is artlessly continued by the love-story of Lida's brother Wies, who had hitherto

been a subsidiary character. But the "story" is nothing to Streuvels — and this holds good of all his work. He is concerned merely with the impression, the reproduction of the mood; and he only makes use of the story in so far as it helps to bring out the impression. In "The Harvest" the purpose is to describe the annual migration of Flemish labourers to reap, drove by drove, in the vast cornfields of France.

"De Werkman" (The Labourer) is a tragic picture of a reaper's return from France. Manse has been having a hard struggle to keep the house going during her husband's absence in the reaping-fields. At last he returns, with his pockets full of money; but when a visit has been paid to the village tradesmen to pay off what is owing, a big hole has been made in Ivo's earnings. If he can get work for the winter months, however, all will be well. But Ivo is one of the last labourers to return, and all the work in the neighbourhood has been snapped up. There is nothing for Ivo, and those who have returned with him, to do but to set out without a moment's delay (lest they should arrive too late here also) for the Walloon country

and seek work in the hated sugar factories, where men are herded and penned like slaves. They dare not stay a single night with their wives and families. During the summer months husband and wife have longed to be together with their children; but the children must be fed, and Manse has hardly time to darn her husband's old clothes before he and his mates set off again—to a worse slavery than before. This tragedy of disillusionment is so simply told; but the very simplicity of the narration (there is no fine writing in Stijn Streuvels) heightens the hopeless misery almost beyond endurance.

Still more poignant is the realism of "Zonder Dak" (Without a Rooftree), the first story in *Openlucht* (The Air of the Open). It is early morning in a tiny garden and a tiny hen-pen; Lowie, a Flemish labourer, is spending the happiest hour of his day before he goes off to work at the farm. The hens, the goat, the rabbits in the hutch, the garden, the cottage—all these are his own. He had toiled and moiled all his life, and scraped penny by penny together to realise the ambition of his life—to have a home

of his own. He had built everything, bit by bit, with his own hands. "And now," he says to his wife, "we can be happy!" When Lowie, this particularly fine morning, has had a look round his domain, and smoked his pipe, he sets out for the farm; but at the corner of the alder-hedge he turns round and stands looking at his cottage in the open field, with its white-washed walls and thatched roof, and the top of the hen-cote and the goat's stable peering out over the green hedge under the pear-tree. He thinks it looks so pretty and it is such a pleasure to look at it, and it is all his—and then there is Wieze, his wife, and the four children, the young rascals. . . . And off he goes, as proud as a king, to his hard day's work. The second part of the tale shows us Wieze dressing the children and giving them their breakfast—a Flemish interior. Then she has to go to the grocer's, and the children are left alone to play. They play at riding in a coach on their parents' bed, and when they are tired of this, they climb up to the attic, though they have been forbidden to go there. It is dark, and they try to open the skylight, but their little fingers cannot lift the

frame. Then they fetch a matchbox and one of them keeps striking matches till all at once the thatch is on fire. The neighbours arrive in time to save the children, but the house and the sheds are burnt down. The mother does not think of the house—it is enough to have the children unharmed; but the father will not be comforted.

Nothing more must be expected of Stijn Streuvels than such simple things as these—simple, but deep, told in the language of everyday life, and yet with a mastery of style. In some of his tales ("Een beroerde Maandag," "Het Duivelstuig") he shows a sense of humour which comes as a relief after his prevailing seriousness: it is a heavy Flemish humour which gathers force very slowly, but in the end is irresistible. One thing in Streuvels is very noticeable after reading Eekhoud and the other Belgian novelists who write in French. The women of Eekhoud, Lemonnier, and the rest are almost always sensual women who call a spade a spade. There is no hint of such things in Stijn Streuvels's tales; and it is evident that either the French-writing novelists brutalise their characters, or Stijn Streuvels idealises his. Pro-

bably the truth is midway. Streuvels is not mealy-mouthed, though the peasants of some of his later tales are obviously too refined; his realism is genuine and convincing. He is certainly a very original writer. The influence of the Russian realists and of Björnson (some of whose tales he has translated) is perhaps discernible here and there; but it would be hard to bring it home. He is weakest where he abandons the transcription of things seen to attempt flights of imagination: *Zomerland*, for instance, is a most confusing blend of poetry and reality—it is hard to know whether the scene is in South Africa or Flanders, whether the period is prehistoric or in our own days.

There is no trace of the maidenly chastity of Stijn Streuvels in the one Flemish-writing novelist whose merit comes near equalling his. This is Cyriel Buysse, a writer whom Maeterlinck, ever lavish of praise, has compared to Guy de Maupassant. Buysse is the nephew of Rosalie and Virginie Loveling, two sisters whose Flemish-written tales and poems are still widely read. He was born in a village near Ghent in 1859,

and he was brought up to succeed his father, who was a manufacturer. In his twenty-fifth year he went to America in the interests of his firm; and it was during the return voyage, two years after, that he determined to turn his back on commerce, for which he felt no aptitude, and devote himself to literature. He began at once to write tales, which in due course were published. His first novel, *Het Recht van den Sterkste* (1893) revealed him as an uncompromising realist of great power.

The Right of the Strongest would have made Zola blush. It is filthy. But the intention is clean: Cyriel Buysse is an austere and noble artist, and if he chooses to regard sexual passion as the most destructive factor in life, he must be allowed the liberty of his opinion, so long as he cannot honestly be accused of pornography. The worst of Buysse is not his filth, but his lack of humour. "Buysse cannot smile," says a Dutch critic. And yet some of the scenes in *The Right of the Strongest*, the brawls in the streets of the vile slum, for instance, are apt to raise a laugh by the grim-visaged sternness of their narration. They remind one of nothing so much as of *The Police Gazette*.

The purpose of the novel is sufficiently indicated by its title. Buysse thinks that physical strength is what shapes the life of the poor. To every woman man is the superman. In a strange scene where a number of women are weeding a field, each one in turn tells, without a vestige of shame, the story of her seduction. "All had been overcome by force, deceit, or surprise; and what they recollected of it was not grief for the loss of their honour, still less disgust at the brutality of the plot, but rather an impression of having been fooled, combined with an unconscious feeling of respect for the man's strength, a feeling of necessary subjection to the right of the strongest." Rape, robbery, drink, fights, poaching, prison; harridans slanging one another at the doors of their filthy hovels; harlotry and incest—is it indeed a true picture of life, or is it the phantasmagoria of a too heated imagination?

Schoppenboer (The Knave of Spades) is not less violent, though another passion, avarice, is brought into play. Old farmer Joncke, whose farm has been burnt down, implores his three sons on his deathbed not to marry, but to live together

and build up the prosperity of the farm again. (The outlines of the novel have some likeness to Ferdinand Bouché's *Les Mourlon*). The three brothers carry out the old man's wishes. But Pol Moeykens, the orphaned son of their sister, comes to live at the farm. The brothers hate the lad, but they cannot refuse to have him live with them, for they fear he might claim his mother's part in the common heritage. In course of time one of the brothers, Jan, discovers that Pol has relations with the servant, his own mistress. Jan broods vengeance, and when Pol gets married and brings his bride to live at the farm he lays his plans to seduce her. He is caught in the act of assaulting her, and is killed with a spade.

Sursum Corda (1894) is socialistic in tendency. It is to some extent an autobiographical novel; the socialist hero is no doubt Buysse himself. There is also autobiography in *'n Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (A Lion of Flanders): the hero is filled with longing to improve the lot of the Flemish poor. His experiences in Parliament disillusionise and disgust him, and he learns that what good he is to do he must do in his private capacity,

with none but his devoted wife to help him. *Op 't Blauwhuis* (In the Blue House) is the old story of a girl of noble birth brought up in seclusion and in total ignorance of the facts of life. Nature and the beasts teach her. *Daarna* (Afterwards) shows that the higher classes are as corrupt as the lower classes. *Wroeging* (Remorse), *Te Lande* (In the Country), *Uit Vlaanderen* (From the Land of Flanders), and *Van Arme Menschen* (Poor Folks) are collections of short stories, many of them of great power.

Another Flemish-writing novelist with a considerable reputation is Herman Teirlinck, who lives at Brussels, the scene of his *Het Ivoren Aapje* (The Ivory Ape). August Vermeylen, better known as poet and critic, has written a notable novel, *De Wandelende Jood* (The Wandering Jew). An Albertian novelist whose reputation is growing, especially in Holland, is Gustaav Vermeersch (*Het Rollende Leven*, 1901).

CHAPTER XIII

POETS IN FLEMISH

THE most important of the Flemish poets write in French. It is useless for the *flamingants* to claim that their Flemish-writing poets are little known abroad owing to the mere accident that they write in Flemish: and that on the other hand poets like Verhaeren and Maeterlinck would have been seen in their true proportion if they had written in Flemish. The French-writing Flemings do not necessarily write in French because they are greater men than those who write in Flemish; but the fact remains, when values are dispassionately compared by international standards, that there are no Flemish-writing poets who reach the height of Verhaeren or Giraud. That is not to say that no Flemish-writing poet is worthy of the most serious attention: as a matter of fact, the Flemish-written poetry is often very beautiful; and the very qualities of the language give it a character of its

own, a character rather of quaintness and idyllic quiet than of strength and revolutionary ardour. The greatest fault that can be charged against Flemish (as against Dutch) poetry is its lack of originality: no Flemish poet has invented a style of his own or cogitated matter which cannot be found at least in germ in other literatures. To the same extent as Ledeganck imitated Byron, Pol de Mont has imitated Tennyson and Longfellow and the German classics. Even the Impressionists, the poets who in recent years have denounced all the productions of their forerunners to burn their brains out in a struggle for an uncompromising originality, import the essence of their manner from the German nebulousness of Stefan George and Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

In Germany at all events one Flemish-writing poet has had full justice done to him. Pol de Mont has been translated into German, and his lecturing tours in the Fatherland have helped to make his name familiar. In his case, indeed, popularity has been helped by the fact that he was one of the acknowledged chiefs in Belgium of the Pan-Germanist school, and that he has worked unceas-

ingly as a writer and as an orator to spread the German idea. His political activity has probably been nefarious; but we shall do no harm if we follow the Germans in giving him his due as a poet.

Pol de Mont, whose best verse is contained in *Claribella* (1893) and *Iris* (1894), is a sentimental and a sensual poet. His sentimentality often verges on the ludicrous, but at his best he strikes poetry out of it—a poetry which as a genre claims a suggestive interest apart from its intrinsic merit. We ought to admit that the very follies of Continental poets often allow them to write genuine poetry which our writers, restrained by a saner but too severe tradition, could never have conceived. An idea of Pol de Mont's sentimentality and puerile images may be gathered from his "Love lies Bleeding":

> "My love like a pale flower lies bleeding . . .
> My love is withering away
> Like a pale flower on stale water feeding
> In a glass, for a day.
> My love like a dim candle is pining,
> Which, when the grey dawn flecks the skies,
> Before Our Dear Lady still is shining,
> All in a flowery Paradise.

"Its delicate flame burned the night-tide through
—A fiery lily
On a slender stem of a milk-white hue—
But now morn is chilly,
And the light burns out amid Our Dear Lady's roses,
Like a glazing eye that for ever closes.

"Now like a royal maiden is my love,
The last child of a long line: shy and tender,
Poor bird to be slain, as the cold wind slays a dove,
Trembling and pale she is, alone, in the great splendour
Of the old grey palace. . . . She sits by the window pane,
And sees the flowers raising their gentle heads,
And opening, opening, opening, glad of the sun and the rain,
Like children's eyes shining in the garden beds . . .

"She knows well, there are no flowers she will cull . . .
She folds her hands together, she knows not how
Her pining, weary heart is suffering now . . .
She is tired, so tired, now that the park is full
Of birds' voices ringing, ringing, ringing, in her ears,
And secretly she weeps her sorrow in hot tears . . .
She weeps—for roses, that have never bloomed,
For the poor bird in the egg-shell entombed,
Haply for eyes that glowing sought her own,
Haply for kisses she has never known . . ."

He is a master of nature-painting, especially of

pastoral scenes. Take, for instance, his "Evening Landscape":

"Softly the day dies out behind the pines;
Over the heathland still the red light blazes;
But paler now and paler the sun shines
On the thin pastures dotted o'er with daisies.

"The plain is vast. The mists of evening lie
Spread at the verge in veils that shift and shimmer;
Yonder a tree uprears to the azure sky
Its leaves that in the twilight faintly glimmer.

"Now listen! Not a sound stirs far and wide.
The birds are silent in their leafy cover;
Only a cricket chirps by the way-side,
And ghostly breezes o'er the landscape hover.

"Slowly, as though afraid of her own feet
On the parched grass, the shepherdess is leading
Home to the fold her flock too tired to bleat,
Red in the light the dying sun is bleeding."

One at least of his poems, "The Heart that is Dead," reads like an echo of Swinburne:

"My heart is dead!—And who shall lay it
In its coffin?—My heart is dead!
Its thirst was sore, and none would allay it;
It was hungry, and no one brought it bread . . .
My heart is dead! And who shall lay it
In its coffin? My heart is dead.

"My heart is dead . . . Let it rest from its anguish
In the first best grave that can be found.
Come, all ye dear ones that saw it languish,
Come nearer, and see it laid in the ground . . .
My heart is dead . . . Let it rest from its angush
In the first best grave that can be found.

"My heart is dead . . . Ye that loved it, come nearer,
Come near it now, and never more.
Tell it, though dead it is dearer and dearer,
Speak to it tenderly as of yore.
My heart is dead . . . Ye that loved it, come nearer,
Come round it now, and never more.

"You brownest of maidens, the first maid that filled it,
The first love it had and the purest aye,
Close with a soft kiss the broad wound that killed it,
Kiss all the ill that it did you away.
You brownest of maidens, the first maid that filled it,
The first love it had, and the purest aye.

"You with the sea-deep eyes that smoulder,
With the kisses of fire, you dark-haired maid,
Lift it up tenderly ere it grow colder,
Take it away like a lamb that had strayed.
You with the sea-deep eyes that smoulder,
With the kisses of fire, you dark-haired maid.

"And you, of all I have loved the sweetest,
You with the eyes that are gentle and mild,

Lay it to sleep in the grave that is meetest,
  Lay it to sleep like a little child . . .
O you, of all I have loved the sweetest,
  Lay it to sleep like a little child.

"Cover it over with cypress and throw ye
  Softly the soil on the heart that is dead . . .
Then in solemn silence homewards go ye,
  But never remember its weedy bed . . .
Cover it over with cypress and throw ye
  Softly the soil on the heart that is dead."

Much of Pol de Mont's blank verse, such as this poem of "Ophelia," reads like Tennyson:

"Even as in May a rustling shower at noon
—While from the South the vernal sun bepaints
The falling drops with all his seven hues—
Rains like a crystal cataract of light
On the green fields, and yet is melancholy,
As deeply melancholy as the face
Of a young wife that through her bridal veil
Weeps at her wedding for an earlier love;—
Even so paced the white maid of Elsinore,
Pale as a corpse, with eyes wept red, that stared
Into an empty space, and yet she smiled,
And yet she hummed a ballad, as she passed
Through the King's deer-park to the quiet brook.

"O sun and rain together, O joy and grief
In one poor heart, O sense and folly blent . . .

O bitter tears and pallor witnessing
A pain that is unconscious of itself . . .
But far more bitter broken song and laughter,
The wistful tokens of a mind diseased . . .
And ever laughing, ever singing, like
A little child that sings because a song,
So often heard and recollected half,
Echoes by chance along his memory—
Even so, beneath high beeches from whose boughs
The dews of morning dripped, slowly she passed,
Onward without a will, and brake and culled
The wildflowers of the meadow—like a child.

"But where the tufted grasses by the brook
Are hung with jewels of splashed foam, and surge
Like tiny waves when the west wind is blowing,
She stayed her listless feet and sang no more,
And, playing, she cast the wildflowers into the water,
With wide blue eyes watching them as they fell
And wakened shining circles in the waves
That rippled to the sedges of the shore.

"But the last wildflower of her gaudy bunch—
A silver-hearted daisy with no scent—
First pensively she held it to her nose,
And then she put the green stalk into her mouth,
Heaved a deep sigh and to her temples pressed
Her delicate hands, hummed the old ballad again,
And then—stretching her arms out like a child
That fights with sleep—she stared and stared at the sun
That shot his watery rays from the dull West.

"Then from the reeds a dragon-fly flew up,
With gold-green belly and black shining wings.
Laughing she snatched at it with shimmering hands . . .
Then she unbraided all her golden hair
And shuddered . . .
With a loud splash she fell
On the still water. Gurgling bubbles rose
From the deep mud, and here and there a fish
Showed twinkling fins that swam to the farther shore.

"And all was silent, all the leaves were still!
In blue dreams sank the evening, the soft gloam
Phantastically dimmed the shapes of things
Till wood and hill and house and castle tower
Faded afar in the half-dark of a dream,
And soon themselves seemed visions, empty dreams.

"But slowly in the clouded grey of the sky
A narrow moon ventured her pallid face
And wept her long pale argent rays upon
The white maid floating down the quiet brook,
Still with the daisy in her lips, the while
Around her head the glory of her hair
Was billowing—like a golden aureole . . ."

But his blank verse has sometimes a more German rudeness. His "Veteran of Wörth" might have been written by Liliencron:

"It haunts my memory.
It was at Wörth,
On the sixth of August in the year of blood.

At evening, six o'clock. We wandered through
The far-stretched battlefield to see if haply
Any yet lived amid so many dead.
Our quest was vain : cold, dumb, and motionless
Lay every body, as though bathed in blood.

"And in a field of hops we came upon
A sight of horror: in a sea of blood
—I know the word is a commonplace, I know—
There lay a whole battalion, man for man,
Of the blue soldiers from Bavaria,
Lying with upturned faces on their backs,
Mowed down, a whole battalion, dead, all dead.
Only the Colonel's horse, a dappled grey,
A big, strong horse, was fighting still with death.
It neighed, its voice seemed human in its pain,
Like a complaint, it rolled about in blood,
And stretched its twitching feet into the air.

"And see: quite near the dead, quite near the blood,
Nay, in the midst of it, there lay untouched
And freshly green, one patch of meadow land,
Hardly a foot across from side to side,
And over it a bright red poppy flower
Cradled its unstained petals, and in them,
Laden and drunk with honey, hummed a bee.

"And the frail poppy and the humming bee,
Full five miles round, were the only living things
That the wild battle had in pity spared."

Perhaps Pol de Mont's best work is a series of poems *Of Jesus*, in which he tells the story of the Saviour's birth. These poems are imitations of old Flemish ballads, and they keep the unevenness and the absurd anachronisms of the originals. Mary and Joseph are an honest Flemish couple who talk and act just as such a couple might do in our own day. Here is "The Journey to Bethlehem":

"Mary and Joseph in winter time
Were summoned to Bethlehem;
His was a poor man's house, and there were
No shoes for either of them.

"It hailed and it snowed and the drifts lay high—
'Twould have moved a stone to pity;
Gentle Mary said with a sigh:
'I shall never get to the city.

"'My limbs feel so heavy, dear Joseph,
Farther I cannot win;
Let us go to the farmhouse yonder,
And ask them to take us in.'

"They dragged their way through slush and snow;
She was leaning on his arm.
She said: 'Do not let me fall, Joseph,
Before we reach the farm.'

"Now the farm was the burgomaster's house ;
He was locking the door for the night.
Joseph said : 'Do not turn us away !
Have pity on our plight !

"'Grant us a place at your hearthstone,
And straw for our weary heads !'
Said the burgomaster : 'This is no inn !
You must go to the inn for beds.'

"There was a stable a long mile away—
Mary was moaning and crying.
Joseph cheered her : 'Take heart, dear wife !'
But she was almost dying.

"And when they came to the stable at last,
It was a wretched house ;
And at the manger, tethered fast,
There were asses and cows.

"It was cold, and Joseph heaped dry dung and straw,
And struck a fire with his steel.
Mary moaned : 'If we only had milk,
To make an evening meal !'

"Joseph went out to fetch water,
But the well was frozen up :
He brake the ice with his good long staff,
And so there was water to sup.

"But when he came back to the stable,
Bringing that water cold,
A Babe lay in our Dear Lady's lap,
Naked, sweet to behold.

"Mary said: 'My Babe, my Lord!
Emmanuel Thy name shall be.
Kneel, Joseph, kneel, and worship the Babe!
Now we are freed from poverty.'"

More reverently comical is "In the Stable," a perfect example of a Flemish carol:

"He woke up his son at the dead of the night,
The burgomaster of Bethlehem:
'Go now to the stable where beggars lodge,
And bring me news of them.

"'An old man is there and a gentle maid:
We do not know who they are;
Harmless they seem, but they may be thieves;
We must not trust them too far!'

"The son loosed the mastiff from the chain,
Took his knotty stick in his hand,
And gripping his pipe between his teeth
Strode away o'er his father's land.

"And when he came to the Chapel, lo!
Just over the stable shone
The brightest and the loveliest star
He ever had looked upon.

"And when he came to the cross-roads, hark!
A choir of cherubs was singing
All round that lowly stable there,
And viols and harps were ringing.

"And when he came to the stable door,
He heard great trumpets blowing,
And between the stable and the sky
Angels were coming and going.

"He turned him back to his father, and said:
'Oh this is a happy morn!
In the stable where cattle and beggars lie,
A Saviour to us is born!'"

A contemporary of Pol de Mont is Victor de la Montagne (born 1854). He writes charming little songs such as "Love's Meandering":

"As the purling brook to the sea goes,
As to my heart the blood,
So my every thought to thee flows,
To thee, my own true love.

"As the purling brook in the sea winds
Into a gulf of pride,
So my every thought in thee finds
Its meaning magnified.

"And as in my heart my blood is
Cleansed of the dross of its fire,
In thee my yearning studies
A pureness of desire.

"As the purling brook to the sea goes,
As to my heart the blood,
So my every thought to thee flows,
To thee, my own true love."

With what a strange familiarity the Flemish poets "play in the straw with the infant of Bethlehem" may be seen again from the following poem by Edmond van Offel (born at Antwerp 1871). He calls it simply "A Little Song":

"Sweet Jesus jumps out of His little bed,
And sends all the bed-clothes flying.

"—'O Jesus dear, take my heart on Your breast,
My heart that is weeping and sighing!'

"Sweet Jesus robes the city in white,
In white like the bride at the altar.

"—'O Jesus dear, take my soul to Your side,
And never again shall it falter!'

"Sweet Jesus lays the fields to sleep,
The fields that are weary and ailing.

"—'O Jesus, give me my innocence back,
And keep my poor feet from failing!'"

In this "little song" there is of course more than meets the eye, and generally Edmond van Offel secretes himself in the panoply of a refined symbolism. Atmosphere, not meaning:

"Afternoon broods o'er the green,
And everything were fain to sleep,
Because the sun will not be seen.
Over all a silence deep;
All ears are closed, and there is not
One step upon the parched grass plot.
And everything were fain to sleep,
Because the sun will not be seen.

"The young woman does her hair,
But with no care, but with no will.
Great joy is lying stiff and still,
Still as the parched green carpet, where
The last flower lies sick and ill,
In dead, dry leaves and dusty green.
Great joy is lying stiff and still,
Because the sun will not be seen.

"The young woman does her hair,
But with no will, but with no care.
She fain would sleep, but cannot sleep;

She fain would go, but knows not where,
And lays her fair young flesh in the green,
And cannot dream, and cannot weep.

"—The sun to-day shall not be seen . . .
The young woman lays her limbs
Where the grey dust the greensward dims.
And when the purple satyr leaps
Out of the reeds that do not sway,
The listless nymph runs not away.
The satyr stands amazed, and creeps
Into the chilly reeds again,
His heart more heavy than with pain.

"And everything is sick and still,
Because the sun is tired and ill . . ."

He can, however, strike the popular note, as in "A Song of Praise," one of the best known of modern Flemish poems:

"I hold my sweet young love so dear
With all the strength that fills me,
With all my will, with all the pride,
With all the fire that thrills me.

"I hold my love so warmly dear
In earnest striving ever;
Crownèd she dwells by all my hope
At the heart of my endeavour.

"She is a mother when I grieve,
A child to play with my leisure,
To my thinking she is a sweet sister,
And a good wife for my pleasure.

"Where'er she goes, she bears my heart
Close nested in her attire ;
Where'er she breathes, she lives in the light
Of my limitless desire.

"And all the building my hands do
Shall be my truelove's dwelling,
A Palace rising round my love,
Magnificent beyond telling.

"I hold my love so dear with all
For which my soul has striven ;
The deepest and the best of me
To her alone is given."

Victor de Meyere (born 1873), too, combines a modern subtlety with a more popular appeal, as in his "Night's Gentleness" :

"A gentleness breathed from everywhere
Round all things now is flowing,
Floating and hovering in the air,
And softened lights now are glowing.

"A perfume as of crushed desire
From the thick of the bushes is sighing . . .
The soul of something is moaning low,
And in the foliage dying . . .

"Something, too, is dying in me . . .
Something in me is weeping—
Something that seeks for sweet words to soothe
My eyes till they are sleeping . . .

"And heavier, heavier on my lips
The stifled silence is weighing,
Because there wells forth from my heart
A pity beyond all saying

"For the man who walks his path alone,
Who has no loved one to cheer him,
No bosom where he can rest his head,
No love in the night-tide near him . . ."

The poets who are the paladins of modernity are Prosper van Langendonck (born at Brussels 1862), August Vermeylen (born at Brussels 1872), and Karel van de Woestijne (born at Ghent 1878). They were associated in the foundation of the review *Van nu en Straks* in 1893. They are impressionists rather than symbolists, and very few of their countrymen understand them. But

obscurity can only be charged against van de Woestijne, the greatest of the three; and his obscurity is the measure of his depth. There is no obscurity in these three mood-paintings by van Langendonck:

I

"I am strange at heart . . . Whelmed and bedimmed as when
November vapour the chill forest loads.
I am sad at heart, like one whose breast forebodes,
Though choked with tears, it never will weep again.

"I am sick at heart . . . O that the strength of men
Ne'er girt me! O to be free from all that goads,
To pierce the whence and whither of the roads,
And why life lures us first and baulks us then.

"From ocean's deeps we climb to seek the air
And the free light, with frantic gasping breath,
Only to meet the ice-crust of despair,
And breathless there to hang 'tween life and death.

"I am sad at heart, like one whose breast forebodes,
Though choked with tears, it never will weep again."

II

"It is my heart that beats in the black tower,
Above the streets deserted in the rain;
Pent in its narrow cell it throbs amain,
Panting, in this quiet evening hour.

"It is my heart that moans in the black tower,
Weeping into the piteous air its pain
In cries of grief for ever born again,
And falling o'er deaf houses like a shower.

"Listen! It is my heart that they are tearing!
My worn-out heart, whose passionate despairing,
Uttering the whole world's pain, cries out for pity!

"And high o'er those that rend it, raised above
All ecstasies of human hate and love
It sheds its helpless anguish o'er the city."

III

"In pain I bore you, but with double bliss
I have cherished you, and warmed you with my fire,
Called you the children of my heart's desire,
Despite my womb's most bitter agonies.

"My children! On your brow has burnt my kiss!
I have cared for you with love that could not tire,
And reared you to be full of holy ire,
And fierce in battle where injustice is—

"But now, when all my fire in you should flare,
Yea, all the passion that my spirit boasts,
Your hopeless misery my affection thwarts!

"Why will you, with your eyes that stare and stare,
Close in upon me like a ring of ghosts?
—O children of my spirit, O my thoughts!"

In mood-painting, too, lies August Vermeylen's strength:

BRUGES

I. *Litanies*

"O! in the dusk of these sepulchral chapels
The singsong of these long, long litanies!
The candles shine before the crape-veiled Cross
Whereon a Christ is dying, centuries old,
With a thin writhing body, black with blood.
Deep in the dusk the great tall candles shine
And conjure forth shadows that come and go
Upon the motionless capes and sombre hoods
Of old, old women that with yellow hands
Folded, incessantly reiterate
The singsong of their long, long litanies.

"It is a distant humming of faint voices,
The tremulous singsong of these litanies;
A lamentation murmured quietly—
Trailing, with its timid 'Pray for us!'
Returning ever, a persistent wail
For penance in the nightmare of a sin . . .
It is a faint far humming of dead voices,
Moaning humility and wretchedness,
Dumb pain, the undying pain of all the world! . . .
O! in the dusk of these sepulchral chapels
Old women singing these long litanies,
These mumbled prayers, for souls in purgatory!

2. Saturday Evening

"This seems an evening of long, long ago . . .
The bells are tolling for the dying sun.
Through lofty windows bleed the last sunbeams,
And slowly, wave by wave, into the church
Stream shadows. Slowly, slowly the bells strew
The heart-pain of this evening o'er the land . . .

"Now, like a dying heart, that hardly beats
Its last tired throbs . . .—Then silence. Far and wide . . .
Only a hollow footfall seems afar
To trail its way o'er cemetery stones.

"My thoughts pace on as silent widows do.
The evening filters through into my soul . . ."

Karel van de Woestijne defies translation and quotation. He is the Mallarmé of the Flemings. . . . This elegy might be attempted :

"Child, your white face is chanting memories,
And the sweet story of your days and mine,
Which in our life like quiet gardens lay
Bathed in the tender twilight dying out ;
While around gardens green the heavens are
A quiet robe of shadows calm and slow,
And while among the trees the last bird's voice
Glows in a long-drawn elegy that sinks
Slowly, and revives, and sinks again . . .

"Now, O my child, no song lives round us, and no
Peace-days like quiet gardens round us live;
No twilight weaves around our mingling dream,
And shadows sad steal round our parted limbs . . .

"And in the night I see, last comfort, only
Your tired white face still trembling, all in tears . . ."

Or this wistful musing:

"How should I know whether my love in you shall sink,
O child,
You that are calm and simply tender like the eve round
grassy graves . . .
For who that sets out with a heart that nothing craves,
Who knows what woman shall refresh his lips
With juicy fruits and love's sweet, restful gifts?

"For see, I think of you, though you are strange to me,
although,
Simple, calm, and tender you are living in my soul,
Although no fears of love seize on your quiet breath to
make it race,
Although your gestures do not seek my life:
I think of your grey eye, calm in your white face."

"A Song of Fever" presents no difficulties:

"It is so sad, this raining in the autumn,
This beautiful rain in the autumn, out of doors,
—How heavy all the flowers are in the autumn;
—And the old rain running along the panes . . .

Gray in the grayness stand the trees and sway,
The trees that are shivering so and rustling tears ;
—And it is the wind, and it so droll a way
Of singing and sighing in the crowns of the trees . . .

" Now I am waiting for the shuffling tread,
I am waiting for the ancient picture of peace,
Old good gray mother comfort round the deep bed
Where the warm fever is dreaming it is alight,
And the thick tears burst through their weight of
lead . . .

". . . It is so sad that I must be wretched now
—It is so sad this raining in the autumn . . ."

CHAPTER XIV

ESSAYISTS, CRITICS, AND SCHOLARS

Of Belgian essayists the prince is of course Maeterlinck, and it might have been expected that his success would have produced imitators. This is not the case, however. The other Belgian essayists who have any reputation have each a style of their own, and no motto of the olden days has been kept more in honour from year to year than Lemonnier's *Soyons nous.* Unfortunately the essayists are for the most part lost in the sea of journalism; but those whose essays have been collected and issued in book form are tangible personalities with something new to offer.

The most eminent, after Maeterlinck, is Edmond Picard. He is an author whom it is very hard to characterise. He has written enormously, and it might have been equally pertinent to discuss him as a dramatist, for his plays (*Jéricho*, *Psuké*, *Le Juré*, *Fatigue de Vivre*, *Ambidextre Journaliste*,

La Joyeuse Entrée de Charles-le-Téméraire) have some claim to originality: they aim at creating a "theatre of ideas." But their discussions are only another manifestation of the unresting activity—political, social, philosophic, critical—of a man who *must* have his finger in every pie. All he has written is only interesting as an expression of the multiple mind of Edmond Picard; and perhaps when his personal influence—he is a Mæcenas and great fomenter of literary work—has passed away his works will fall out of literature. But at all events he is at the moment one of the first of Belgians as he is one of the most prominent citizens of Brussels. His books of travel (*En Congolie*, *El Moghreb al Aksa*, *Monseigneur le Mont Blanc*) are well known, but his most popular work are the the four volumes of his *Scènes de la Vie Judiciaire* (*Paradoxe sur l'Avocat; La Forge Roussel; L'Amiral; Mon Oncle le Jurisconsulte*), in which, by examples from everyday life, he interprets the spirit of law. "Uncle Picard" is, moreover, famous in Belgium as the apostle of Belgian nationalism. "Belgian" is for him not a merely geographical term with no inner meaning, but the name of

something markedly individual among the nations of the world. Other writers have divided "Belgian" into two parts; "Flemish"—*i.e.* Dutch; and "Walloon"—*i.e.* French. Picard will have none of this; there are, according to him, and there *must* be, Belgians; and he wishes the Belgians to be conscious and proud of their national characteristics. His adversaries twit him with having invented *l'âme belge*, the Belgian soul; but the war should have proved that he was a far-sighted patriot.

Another politician who is a stylist of great refinement is the socialist leader, Jules Destrée. He began with poems in prose, *Les Chimères* (1889), a book full of the pessimism of the period, full of disgust with life, a companion volume to Gilkin's *La Nuit*. He has written a psychological and social novel: *Le Secret de Frédéric Marcinal*, and a study of Belgium's black country: *Le Bon-Dieu-des-Gaulx*. *Quelques Histoires de Miséricorde* are a collection of socialist tales. Other works of his are *Lettres à Jeanne* (1887); *Imagerie Japonaise* (1889); *Journal des Destrée* (1892). But probably his best work is contained in *Discours Parle-*

mentaires and in the essays of *Semailles* (1913). Destrée is also a distinguished art critic, and he has done much to popularise art among the masses.

Like Destrée's *Les Chimères*, Arnold Goffin's books are black with pessimism. His style is iced with the hatred of the follies of our time. His fiction (*Journal d'André*, 1885; *Delzire Moris; Maxine*, 1887) is thinly veiled self-analysis, not radically different from that in the essays of his *Impressions et Sensations* (1888).

A writer of rare books with restricted editions, James Vandrunen is known as a stylist who with patient words colours exquisite reveries. He is a writer for the few; and that is his glory. *Elles!* (1887) is an analysis of love which decides against the vulgarity of the dream's materialisation and finds its refined and melancholy delights in an intellectual Mormonism. *Les Forêts* (1888) are impressionistic essays which describe forests with a very delicate artistry matched by the form of the book itself—it is printed in green, blue, red, silver, pink, and black letters on terra-cotta paper. *Quillebœuf* (1888) is a *vieillerie en bleu et noir*,

a piece of literary tapestry figuring an old rock n the Seine in Normandy. He has also written books of travel (*En Pays Wallon*, 1900; *Heures Africaines*, 1910). A book on Vandrunen has been written by Auguste Vierset, one of the brilliant writers of *La Wallonie.* Another essayist who chisels every sentence is Eugène Baïe (*Épopée Flamande; Sub Umbra et sub Rosa*); it is perhaps the highest praise to say that he is hardly read by any except his fellow-craftsmen, to whom he is a master.

Among the younger essayists the most subtle is perhaps Charles Bernard, a lawyer and journalist in Antwerp. Léon Souguenet (a Frenchman by birth, but long resident in Belgium) is a force in journalism; he has written literary criticism (*Les Monstres Belges*, 1904), a book on London (*À la Découverte de Londres*, 1909), and in *La Victoire des Vaincus* he has collaborated with Louis Dumont-Wilden, the most noted of contemporary Belgian critics. Dumont-Wilden has written tales (*Visages de Décadence; Coins de Bruxelles; Le Coffre aux Souvenirs*); a species of guide-book, *La Belgique Illustrée;* and much art criticism (*Le Portrait en

France; Fernand Khnopff). His *Les Soucis des Derniers Soirs* is a series of subtle dialogues in which philosophic doubt is probed and tortured. Dumont-Wilden is Edmond Picard's classic antagonist: far from believing in *l'âme belge*, he is more French than the French themselves, and his book of essays *L'Esprit Européen* has since the outbreak of the war been awarded a large sum of money by the French Government. It is one of those books which the war has made more topical; and in its way it is a prophecy of the French victory. The author follows, with shrewd observation, the growth of "the French spirit" in Europe, and analyses the causes of its ascendency. In the Middle Ages, he establishes, there was something that could be called a European spirit; and if the nations of Europe were to be threatened by Islam or by the yellow races it might appear again. But this European spirit was held together by the Roman Catholic religion, and the Reformation destroyed the unity. Since Luther, Europe has been nothing more than a collection of states each of which, indifferent to any moral unity, strives to impose its domination by conquest. The

birth of the new spirit was in humanism: religion had been nationalised, humanism is international. The history of literature proves that in this new bond of nations France took the lead, and that all the nations accepted her hegemony. The empire of the mind is French; the empire of taste is French. French culture is the only higher culture. The end of the eighteenth century marked the apogee of the intellectual domination of France in Europe. Everywhere French culture was superposed on national and popular culture. With the Revolution it seemed to lose its prestige. Europe had willingly submitted to the ascendency of the French aristocracy; it was hostile to the French democracy. After 1870 it seemed for a time as if the nations would succeed in escaping from the fascination of French culture. But they did not succeed, and their efforts only went to show the helplessness of rival cultures. Obviously, if there were no French spirit, there would be no European spirit, that is to say, there would be no single culture which could be superposed on the various national cultures. A business man might object that Germany and Great Britain are supreme, as

far as economic power is concerned; but political economy, with its vulgar utilitarianism and its indifference for the things of the mind, will never be able to create a culture. A culture is always the product of an élite, and gold does not represent an élite. In reality, the new European spirit is being created by a cosmopolitan élite composed of idle people, dilettanti, artists, great lords, and adventurers. The Jews have imported a new element into it; Slavs and Germans are more numerous in this company than Frenchmen. But this world none the less expresses itself in French, and its culture is French. Nietzsche, who invented the "good European," foresaw a species of individual who should be "essentially supernational, and who, as a distinctive sign, would possess, physiologically speaking, a maximum of faculties and of assimilative force." But Nietzsche also foresaw reactions in the direction of accentuated national feeling; and we have seen such reactions in recent years. Even the little countries are claiming to be themselves; and in France for some time we have been witnesses of a sort of reconstitution of the national feeling whose sudden

explosion is to-day striking all Europe with astonishment. There is a fever in France which shows that she has, besides the feeling of right and justice, the passion of war. Certain of the "good Europeans" are disturbed by this manifestation. They love France, but a humiliated France, only on condition that France is the *græculus* of modern Europe. But the young generation of Frenchmen want none of that. They prefer the hatred of Europe to its scornful affection. France is beginning to realise that she can only count upon herself.

Another essay of the book discusses "culture." This is a German word which does not sound well in French. The Germans invented it because it was their idea to blend moral influence and political influence. No one can adopt German culture without working for the extension of the German Empire. French civilisation, on the other hand, remains indifferent to French politics, and that is why it is European. Just as in former times the worst enemies of France, Frederick the Great, Catherine of Russia, were French in spirit, so to-day the nations that are the political enemies of

France speak her language. But German science, German literature, German art, German civilisation are all instruments of German politics. On account of this German attitude it is urgent to defend this liberty of the mind, this humanity, this French culture. And for the Gallic race the best means of defence is to take the offensive. When France defends herself, she defends Europe!

Much of this seems almost trite to-day; but the war has only proved how wideawake this Belgian writer was to the new French spirit. Dumont-Wilden illustrates his argument by brilliant profiles of men who stood to Europe for the French spirit—the Prince de Ligne, that Belgian soldier who fought for Austria and was one of the finest conversationalists of his day, as he was the forefather of modern Belgian literature; Talleyrand; Stendhal; Maurice Barrès; André Gide. Maeterlinck he takes as a representative of the pseudo-French spirit.

Of the historians of Belgian literature none has done better work than Francis Nautet, whose *Histoire des Lettres Belges d'Expression Française* was unfortunately never completed. It is a valu-

able book which has become very rare; and a reprint is one of the needs of the hour. Nautet was in the swim of the movement in the 'eighties, and his enthusiasm, as Verhaeren says, "joyously harnessed itself in front of the car of the first harvests of our art." Maurice Gauchez apparently aims at being the Belgian Remy de Gourmont; the three heavy volumes of *Le Livre des Masques Belges* are modelled on the French *Livres des Masques*. The portraits are interesting; and something can be gleaned from the criticism, though one refuses to believe that even a little country like Belgium, where admission to the literary cafés and a nodding acquaintance with the lions seem to entitle a writer to fame, can produce such multitudinous hordes of geniuses. Gauchez has also written a serviceable book on Verhaeren. His poetry (*Images de Hollande*, 1912; *Paysages Suisses*, 1913) is laboured and cold. Eugène Gilbert's criticism is somewhat biassed by his Roman Catholic standpoint, but his critical essays (*En Marge de quelques Pages; France et Belgique*) are often illuminating. In *Les Lettres Françaises dans la Belgique d'Aujourd'hui* (1906) he has written the handiest manual

of modern Belgian letters. Firmin van den Bosch (now a member of the International Tribunal in Egypt) is a critic of equal reputation and similar tendencies (*Essais de Critique Catholique; Les Lettres et la Vie; Coups de Plumes; Impressions de Littérature Contemporaine*).

The representative Belgian writer of books of travel is Jules Leclercq. His latest volume is *La Finlande aux mille Lacs* (1914); other books of his are *Les Îles Fortunées, Au Pays de Paul et Virginie, Java;* but he is an inveterate globe-trotter, and he has described his experiences in nearly every part of the world.

It would require a whole book to deal with the art critics of Belgium. There would not be much risk in assuming that every writer of distinction has one or more books of art criticism to his credit. (Maeterlinck is the only exception that occurs to one.) Of the writers in Flemish, there is a multitude of books by Max Rooses and Pol de Mont, some of which have been translated into English. Of the many who write in French, Fierens-Gevaert might be singled out for special mention. He makes art criticism a romance. One

of his best books is *La Peinture au Musée de Bruxelles*.

Of the academic scholars there are few who have an international reputation. The academic life of Belgium is the least satisfactory aspect of its intellectual activity. Professors are apparently appointed because they are orthodox and supporters of the Government; originality is vetoed. There are, however, some Belgian scholars of distinction. In philosophy Georges Dwelshauers has a considerable reputation, at all events in Belgium. The two scholars who have first-class importance as men of letters are the historian Henri Pirenne and the philologist Maurice Wilmotte.

Henri Pirenne was born at Verviers, was the disciple at the University of Liége of Godefroid Kurth, the author of *Les Origines de la Civilisation Moderne*, continued his studies in Paris, Leipzig, and Berlin, and in 1889 established his reputation by his specialist work *Histoire de la Constitution de la Ville de Dinant*. His *Les Anciennes Démocraties des Pays-Bas*, dealing with the establishment of trading centres, is more

popular in tone. Appointed Professor of History at Ghent, he devoted his best energies to the writing of his *Histoire de Belgique* (four volumes, 1899–1911), which was published in German before it appeared in French. This history has in Belgium itself had something of the popular success which that of Macaulay achieved in England. The Belgians are notoriously poor readers, owing perhaps to the mediocrity of their educational institutions — the great Belgian writers have their public in France and (alas!) in Germany; but Pirenne is a Belgian writer who is actually read at home. The education of an officer is not complete till he has read the national historian; and the History is in great demand as a prize in schools and colleges. Parties go to the work to justify their theories; Edmond Picard's party in particular finds in it the confirmation of the theory that Belgium exists and that there are and always have been Belgians. Pirenne himself is free from party bias; he is a scientific historian, a Walloon with a scholar's extensive knowledge of the Flemish language and of Flemish literature, a cosmopolitan who can see the part which Germany and France

together have had in the making of Belgium. He says:

"Like our soil, formed by the alluvia of rivers coming from France and Germany, our national culture is a sort of syncretism in which can be found, blended and modified the one by the other, the genius of two races. Solicited on all sides, our culture has been broadly receptive. It is open like our frontiers, and in it are to be found, in its periods of blossoming, the best elements of Franco-German civilisation richly and harmoniously assembled. It is in this admirable receptivity, in this rare aptitude of assimilation, that the originality of Belgium resides. It is this which has enabled us to render signal services to Europe, it is to this that our country is indebted for the possession of a national life common to each of the two races it contains, without sacrificing the individuality of each."

Pirenne is perhaps the only man of letters in Belgium who has made a fortune by the sale of his works among his own countrymen. How extensive his sales are (for Belgium) may be seen from the fact that more than seven hundred copies of the fourth volume of his history were sold in three days. With the proceeds he has built a villa in the Ardennes. One may agree with Firmin van den Bosch, who says: "If, some day, Belgium were to be erased from the map of the

world, Henri Pirenne's *History of Belgium* would survive as the immortal and moving Will and Testament of a little nation which through the centuries affirmed the obstinate consciousness of its destiny."

Maurice Wilmotte, a professor at the University of Liége, a Romance philologist who ranks with the best of those in Germany and France, and the editor of *La Revue de Belgique*, is, politically, an antagonist of Pirenne. To Pirenne, Belgium is a blend; Wilmotte asserts, in his *La Culture Française en Belgique* (1913) that the two races have never blended. Each race, according to him, keeps the originality of its temperament; and the task of either is to rise to the great current of French culture. "The Belgians have no national literature," he says.

Of one Belgian critic, the Viscount Charles de Spoelberch de Lovenjoul, it may be said that he invented a new manner of criticism. He was a patient collector of first editions and of bibliographical material concerning the lives of great writers, especially of the writers of the Romantic School. In *La Véritable Histoire de "Elle et*

Lui" he throws light on the relations of Alfred de Musset and Georges Sand. Other works of his are: *L'Histoire des Œuvres de H. de Balzac*, *La Génèse d'un Roman de Balzac*, *Une Page Perdue de H. de Balzac*, *Autour de H. de Balzac*, *L'Histoire des Œuvres de Th. Gautier*, *Un Roman d'Amour*, *Les Lundis d'un Chercheur*, *Sainte-Beuve Inconnu*, *Trouvailles d'un Bibliophile*.

There are several other authors of distinction who would have been worthy of enumeration in this chapter if there had been space. There are individual books of excellent criticism such as Gustave Abel's *Labeur de la Prose*, Gérard Harry's *Maurice Maeterlinck* (translated by Alfred Allinson), *Études et Portraits Littéraires* by M. J. Carez, Désiré Horrent's *Écrivains Belges d'Aujourd'hui*. Finally, the chief reviews should be mentioned, for they contain much that has permanent value, and much that is not reprinted in book form (for there are so few Belgian publishers that authors, unless their work attracts sufficient attention to catch the eye of Paris publishers, have often to issue their books at their own expense). The most artistic of the

literary magazines is perhaps *Le Masque*, edited by Grégoire Le Roy and Georges Marlow. Its career has been somewhat erratic, like its contributors, but that is only a further claim on collectors. Georges Rency's *La Vie Intellectuelle* believes devoutly in *l'âme belge* and the possibility of a national literature, upholds the theory that those Belgian authors who migrate to Paris lose caste, and sedulously recommends itself and its ideals to the present King and Queen, who are said to take an interest in the national literature, even in so anti-Catholic a writer as Verhaeren, who is received at Court. *La Vie Intellectuelle* is a combative review, full of zest and go. (One of the contributors to its back pages, by the way, was Émile Cammaerts, who wrote the monthly letter from London.) *Le Thyrse*, edited by Léopold Rosy, is rather derisive of the "Belgian" ideals. It sides with Maurice Wilmotte, and its belief in the intellectual mediocrity of Belgium is unshakable. Wilmotte's *Revue de Belgique* is learned and academic. *L'Art Moderne* and *La Belgique Artistique et Littéraire* are competent in their discussion of art and literature, while *Durendal* is

the organ of the Roman Catholic men of letters. Of the reviews in Flemish the chief are *Van Nu en Straks* and *Vlaanderen*.

Perhaps one should say of these reviews: They were. . . . But we may expect them to arise from their ashes when peace comes, and it is to be hoped that they will then be admittedly "Belgian." For, as Stuart Merrill has said, if Belgium did not exist, it would have to be invented.

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J. B.

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